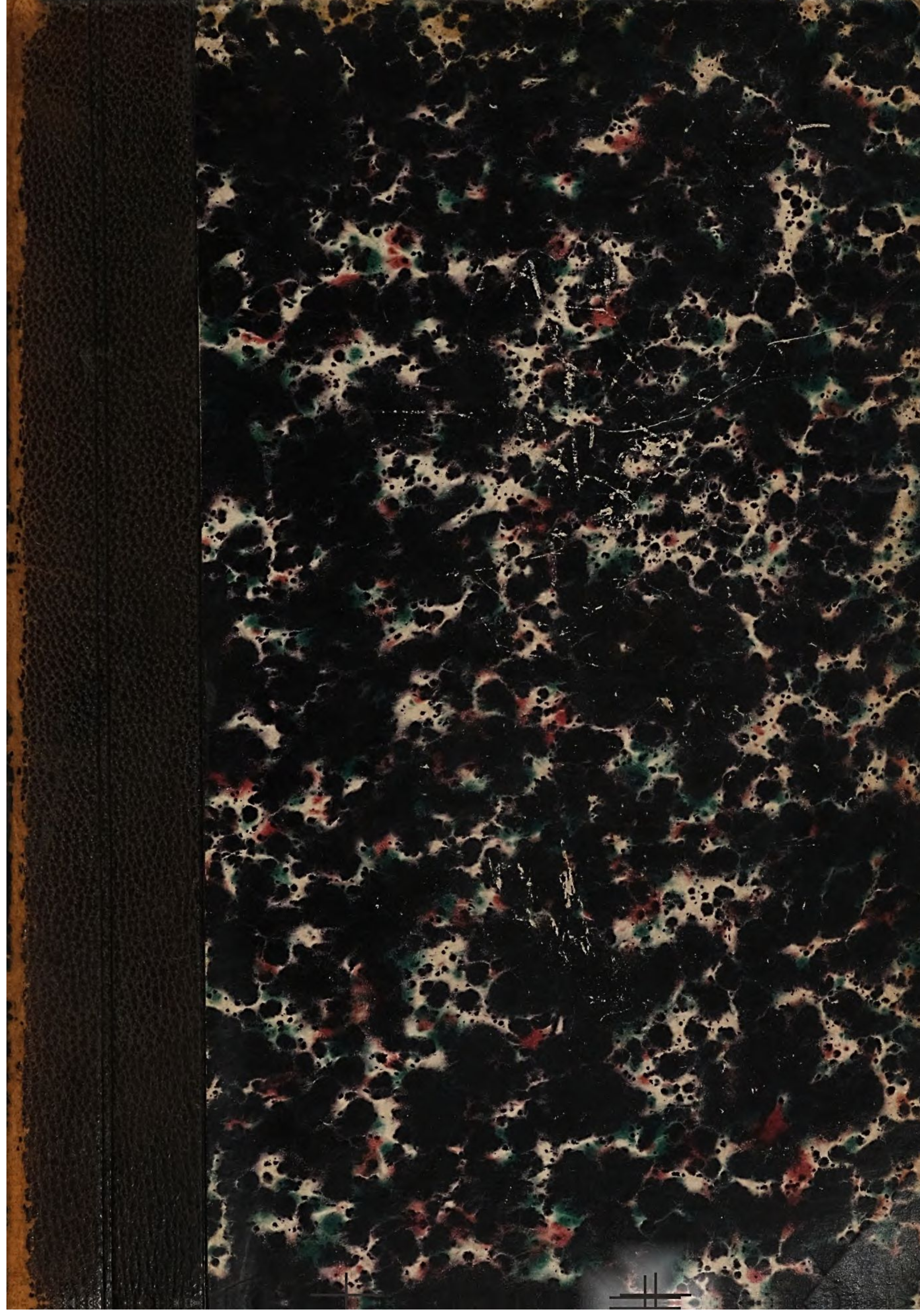




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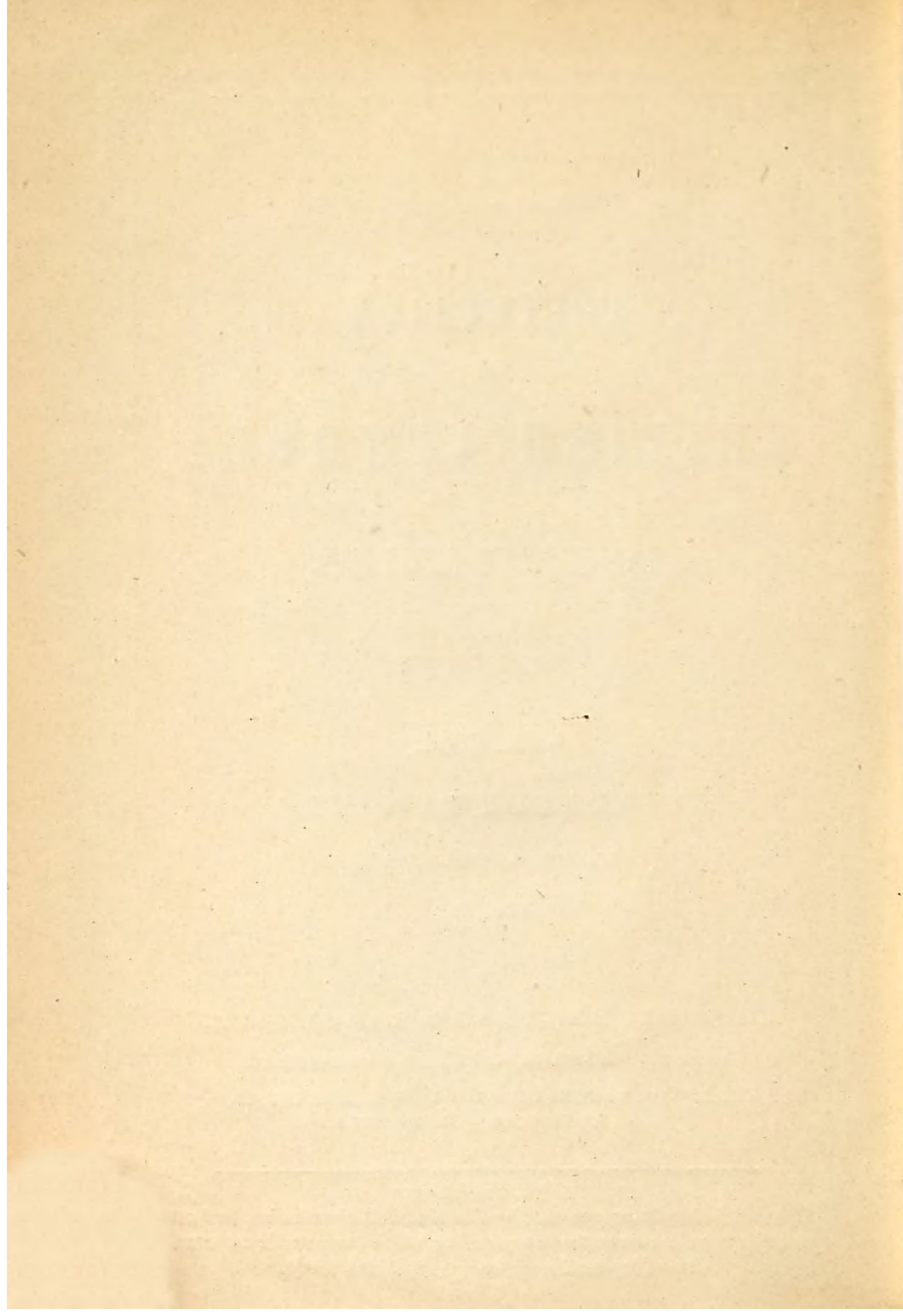
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VOL. II.

GUILDEROY

BY

O U I D A,

AUTHOR OF

“UNDER TWO FLAGS,” “SIGNA,” “A HOUSE PARTY,” ETC.

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I N T W O V O L U M E S.

VOL. II.

L E I P Z I G

B E R N H A R D T A U C H N I T Z

1889.



G U I L D E R O Y.

CHAPTER I.

THE essay on Friendship had been finished, and had found its way into print in a famous review, though its writer declared it a mere spurious and worthless offspring of the Lysis. Guilderoy had on more than one occasion amused himself with casting his thoughts on paper, and the world assured him that he might attain eminence in letters if he cared to do so. But he considered this flattery; and, even had it been true, he would have considered it far too much trouble to obey its suggestion.

Aubrey read the essay when it appeared, and approved of it.

"Only allow me to say, my dear Evelyn," he observed one summer day at Ladysrood, when they were alone on the terrace, "that it is odd that any man who has such admirable theories as yours, should go so utterly against them in practice as you do. I know no living person who is so little heedful of the feelings of others, or so little constant in his own feelings, as yourself. Pray forgive me the remark. I am no doubt

leaving good manners outside the temple of intimacy in presuming to make it."

"You are quite welcome to make it, and no doubt it is true enough," said Guilderoy, who nevertheless was not pleased. "I see how things ought to be; I do not pretend to make them what they ought. I do not think that I am a false friend, as you imply!"

"I do not think you are a friend at all," said Aubrey. "You do not care about men's friendship, and with women you have, if you remark them at all, something much warmer than friendship. But what I meant to convey is that, despite your admirable knowledge of the sensitiveness of the human soul, and of what is due to it in intimacy, you entirely neglect observance of those duties."

"What do you mean?" said Guilderoy, a little annoyed.

"What I say," replied Aubrey. "You know the duties of a sympathetic friend, but I fear you never fulfil them."

"We are not bound to put our theories into practice. If we were, authors would be a race apart; the missing link between man and the angels."

"Yes, I suppose no writer ever did, except Socrates, and he got poisoned for his consistency."

"And he was not a writer, by your leave, my dear scholar; only a teacher."

"True; but really, Evelyn, your theories are so charming that you should attempt to carry them out in your own life, and perhaps you would be the happier for doing so; egotism is tempting, but it is not always so happy as it looks."

"I am not more of an egotist than most men," said Guilderoy, moved to a certain irritation. Aubrey raised his eyebrows.

"In what way am I?" asked Guilderoy, with petulance. "Pray let us speak as if we were at the bottom of her well with Truth."

"With all my heart, but Truth, like most ladies, will probably move us to quarrel about her."

"Oh, no; pray continue."

"Well, have you ever lived for anybody, except yourself, in your life?"

"For a little while I did," said Guilderoy honestly; and he sighed, for he was thinking of the first period of his love for Beatrice Sorìa.

"Oh, no, you did not even then," said Aubrey, who knew what the sigh and the answer meant. "It was all self-indulgence, almost all love is; at least when it is victorious."

"How can you divorce self, and the passions?"

"Not easily, I admit."

Aubrey was silent a moment, then he said suddenly:

"Will you allow me to ask you one thing? Do you think your wife is happy?"

Guilderoy's face flushed slightly.

"She is not a happy disposition," he said evasively. "The world does not amuse her. Then she has lost two children; and she has very over-wrought expectations."

"Of you?"

"Of me, of human nature, of life in general. Because her father has the virtues of a saint and a solitary,

she expects every man to be a Saint Jerome or a Basil."

"Between Jerome and Basil, and Lovelace and Wildair, there is considerable room for something else; they are at the two ends of the ladder of human desires."

"She sees nothing between the saint and the profligate."

"A woman usually only sees extremes. But I do not believe she knows anything about profligacy, and I think you could easily make her happy if you chose."

"My dear Aubrey!" cried his cousin with much impatience. "If there is a parrot phrase which is absolutely senseless, it is that about making a woman happy! She *is* happy, and you are happy in her happiness, and your own, spontaneously, *sans chercher ni vouloir*, just as birds are in the summer woods; and there is no happiness at all for either of you. Happiness is not a kind of pastry that you mix and roll out and put in the oven till it is done to a turn. It is an immense pleasure, born out of heaven knows what, half of the senses and half of the soul, but no more to be stabled or harnessed than Guido's coursers that run with Aurora. Happiness elaborately *made* would not be happiness; it would bear the traces of effort, and would be utterly without charm."

"Nevertheless in your essay you admit that friendship is a delicate plant, which requires fitting atmosphere and culture; so also is love surely; neither will resist neglect."

"Are you speaking of love? I thought you were speaking of my wife," said Guilderoy in that tone of

indolent insolence, which was often his shield when he did not choose to be questioned.

Aubrey rose and did not reply. He did not care to continue the argument in that tone; and he feared that he should say too much if he said anything more.

"Why should you be angry?" said Guilderoy. "She might be if she were here. I assure you it is the only word of disparagement which I have ever permitted myself about her. She is exceedingly handsome; she is immaculately good; and she is the daughter of the man I most respect upon earth. But all these excellent things do not make up happiness. Happiness is the child of harmony, who the Greeks tell us was the child of Eros."

Aubrey remained silent; he felt more anger in him than he wished to betray.

"You should have married her, not I," continued his cousin. "You would have suited her most admirably. You would have buried yourselves in the northern mists at Balfrons, and a Blue-book would have occasionally visited you as your only *oiseau bleu*."

"*You* certainly should not have ever married at all," said Aubrey, who did not care for those jests. "Catullus puts Eros and Hymen in the same strophe, but no one else ever succeeded in doing so."

"And he did not do it in practice, only in verse," said Guilderoy.

"Hush, she is coming to us," said Aubrey, as he saw the tall and slender form of the mistress of Ladysrood approaching the terrace on which they were sitting; the old grey stone terrace of the west front, of

which the buttresses and flights of steps were half smothered in virginia creeper and banksia.

Guilderoy rose, and, with that graceful courtesy which he never neglected, took off his hat, and gave her his seat, which was the most comfortable of all the lounging-chairs there. He stayed a moment or two speaking of trifles, and then went away. She looked after him wistfully. She would have preferred less elaborate courtesy, and more of his time.

"I am afraid I have disturbed him," she said with apprehension.

"Not in the least; we were just going away," said Aubrey, hastily, as he thought, "Good heavens! is he bored if he has to talk to her for ten minutes? And yet if she were any one else's wife, he would spend whole years at her feet, I am certain."

For that one August day he was alone with them. On the morrow some half-hundred of fashionable people were to arrive and bring their London and Paris life into the green gardens and old walls of Ladysrood, which always seemed to its châtelaine in discord with them. But it was only by having the world with him there that Guilderoy could be induced to pass some of the late summer or early autumn months at home. He loved the place in his own way, but life in it wearied him more since his marriage than it had done before, when he had been able to bring with him any questionable preferences of the moment or else stay there in that complete solitude which at rare intervals soothed and pleased him.

Aubrey looked at her where she reclined in the long low chair. She wore a white wool gown without

ornament of any sort. Her figure was still very slender, but her bosom was full, and her arms were rounded, her shining hair hung in loose waves over her forehead and was coiled behind in heavy masses fastened with a gold comb.

How strange it seemed to him that his cousin should pass his life in almost absolute indifference to her! The vision which Guilderoy had in jest put before him of a happiness which might have been possible for himself made his eyes dim for a moment as he gazed at her. But he quickly banished so enervating a fancy, and spoke to her.

"I wish," he said with hesitation, "that you could interest yourself more in the life which goes on around you. I know you do not care for it; your early life unfitted you for it, but it would be well if you could simulate some enjoyment of it; you would become more popular and Evelyn would be better pleased."

"Popular!" she repeated with the accent of some young duchess of the eighteenth century to whom some one should have counselled remembrance of the mob.

"I think it is quite disgraceful," she added, "the way in which all society, with princes at its head, courts popularity nowadays. I should never have supposed you would have cared for it."

"My dear child, princes feel their thrones slipping from under them; they catch at any straw. But I did not mean popularity for you in any low sense of the word. I meant that you would be more generally liked, and so more able to exercise the kind of influence which you would wish to possess. When society is

aware that you think it a flock of geese, it revenges itself by hissing loudly behind your back."

"It is welcome to do so."

"Ah! that tone is just what I complain of; it is too cynical, it is too unsympathetic; you are too young to use it. When the worst is said of it, there remains a great deal that is interesting and profitable to study in society, and when you know that Guilderoy is always anxious that you should be admired and liked, I do not consider that you ought to shut yourself up in a shell of apparent ill-humour, which is not really in any way your nature."

"I think it is becoming my nature."

"God forbid! I hope you will soon have other children with whom you can play on the lawns yonder, and be a child again yourself. Then you will forgive society, which is after all only a very sick and froward child itself, and breaks all its playthings."

Her face clouded, and she did not reply; her brows were drawn together in a frown, half sullenness, half sadness, as she looked out from under her long curling lashes at the green woods of the home-park which stretched in the distance as far as the eye could reach.

"You see," she said at last, "you see that I can never amuse Evelyn. He does not even talk to me if he can help it. He is always amused and interested with other women; never with me."

"Perhaps you exaggerate that fancy."

"Oh no; I felt it in Venice that first year. I am tiresome to him. No one can alter that. It is a calamity; nothing can change it."

"It is not an uncommon calamity in marriage. Incessant association is so often fatal to attraction. It is no fault or failure in either very often. Simply proximity has destroyed charm. But I know, dear, this sad philosophy can be no comfort to you. It is as useless for consolation as the cold physiological demonstration of a surgeon to a mother that her dying child has had the seeds of death in him from his birth."

"Certainly, it does not console me," she said with a bitterness which was growing upon her every year, more and more. "Physiology and philosophy explain everything after their own fashion; but I never see that they make anything any better."

"No," said Aubrey. "Whether we are suffering from bodily or mental pain the diagnosis with which our physicians interest themselves has little consolation for us, especially when it leaves us uncured and incurable."

"Tell me," she said abruptly. "You have known him all his life. Is there any woman whom he really loves? Sometimes I think there is."

"I hope there is—yourself."

She made a gesture almost of anger. "Pray do not fence with me, and spare me these *fadeurs*. One does not look for them from you. Answer my question."

"I am not in his confidence," replied Aubrey, which he could say with a measure of truth at least. "I do not think, if you ask me my frank opinion, that he is a man who has ever distressed himself with a truly great passion. Men who merely seek in love their own self-indulgence are not lovers in the romantic sense of the word, they are not lovers like Montrose or Stradella,

or Chastellard. To Henri Quatre, Petrarch would have seemed a poor fool."

"These are generalities," she said, impatiently.

"And you want personalities, like a true woman?" said Aubrey with a smile. "Well, my child, you would not get them from me; even were I in possession of my cousin's secrets, which I am not. I think your greatest enemy could do you no worse turn than to help you to try and rake amongst the cold ashes of your husband's caprices."

"The ashes may be warm," she said with impatience. "Or there may be fresh fires."

"If there were," replied Aubrey, "believe me you would only make them burn furiously by throwing on them the phosphorus of an irritated and inquisitive jealousy. Believe me, dear, there is only one *couvre-feu* to which a woman can trust to extinguish a glow which offends her; it lies in her own wisdom and devotion. And do not again try to make me fill the office of tale-bearer. If I knew anything of his affairs, which I do not, I would not descend to such an ignominy, even to serve you."

She coloured at the implied rebuke, and was silent.

"You are not so amiable as you were, my dear," said Vernon to her on one of the days in which she was with him alone for a few hours.

"I daresay not," she answered, almost sullenly. "The world does not make one amiable."

"That depends on disposition," he answered. "On the whole, I think people who live in it are more amiable than those who live out of it. The friction with others and the variety of interests which it offers

tend to give tolerance, pliability, and good humour to the character. The world is to men and women what school is to children; at the expense of originality and meditation it teaches social wisdom and moderates over-expectation."

"To some, at least, it teaches all forms of self-indulgence," she said bitterly.

Her father looked at her.

"You are thinking of Guilderoy?"

"Yes."

"Then I think you do very wrongly, my dear. He has many better qualities than his self-indulgence, which is only the necessary outcome of great freedom to enjoy pleasure. Why not dwell rather on those?"

She said nothing.

"I do not think you have followed the counsels I gave you when you first returned here from Venice," he continued. "I do not think you at all endeavour to do what I told you to do."

"What would be the use if I did? He would only consider that I bored him if I offered him any demonstrations of attachment. No one can make the happiness of another person when they are wholly outside the other's life, as I am outside his. I have not the faintest idea of his real interests, his real desires, or of what he does in the time he is away from me, which is by far the larger part of his time."

Vernon sighed. He had foreseen it all as clearly as though a magic crystal had shown it to him. But that made it none the less painful to him.

"He is kind to me in many things—I do not deny it—and very generous," she continued. "But I feel that

I am only wearisome to him, just as Ladysrood is, though he loves Ladysrood, and he does not love me."

"Why should you think he does not? After these years you cannot expect the caresses of a lover."

"He never loved me, never!" she said sadly. "It was a caprice. He has so many caprices! He regrets the cost of this one every day of his life, I know, though he is a gentleman and does not say so."

"Are you sure you are not morbidly fanciful, my child? Cannot you be content with the sense that you are much nearer to him than any other woman can be?"

She smiled. The smile was not the one which had used to come on her face.

"I am much farther off him than any other woman is! He would tell any stranger anything sooner than he would tell it to me. My dear father! All that you say, they call *vieux jeu* in our world: that world which you think should make me so amiable!"

"I may have old-fashioned ideas, dear," said Vernon, pained by her tone, "but however fashions change, I do not think humanity changes so very greatly under them; and *tant que le monde est monde*, I think that a woman will make her own unhappiness by exaggeration of her wrongs, and that a great and genuine devotion on her part will touch any man soon or late."

"You are an optimist; he always says so."

"Does he? Yet I was very far from optimistic when I endeavoured to dissuade you both from your union."

She knew that he had indeed done his best to prevent her marriage, and she said nothing more.

"My dear," he added very gravely, "the fatal mistake of every woman is to weigh the man in her own scales. You might as well say the rosemary growing yonder in the earth has the same needs and the same habits as the sea-gull flying over there. It is this horrible pretension, or mistake, or ignorance, whichever it is, in the minds of women which makes their own misery in so much. I am afraid you are now making it, as so many of your sisters have done before you to their cost. The man is all in all to the woman, but she can never be all in all to him, except in some few first hours of delirium. The woman can receive no happiness, physical or mental, save from her beloved; but he can find pleasure, if not happiness, with those whom he despises. 'L'homme aime pour le plaisir qu'il reçoit; la femme aime pour le plaisir qu'elle donne.' Possession and intimacy confirm and strengthen the passion of the woman; but in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred they destroy the man's passion altogether, and leave at their best but gratitude or tenderness behind them. These are painful truths which every woman, my dear child, has to learn. The happy women are those who learn, and do not fret at the lesson. The unhappy are those who incessantly strive to resist the laws of nature. I want you to be happy. But happiness will not come by any effort that you make to dwell, or to force a man to dwell, in an imaginary heaven of impossibilities. Nor will it come through any turbulence or bitterness of jealousy."

Again she did not reply. Her heart gave no echo to the words, and she felt almost bitterness against her adviser for the tolerant wisdom of them. "He is not a

woman; how can he tell what one suffers?" she mused impatiently.

"I suppose I erred in her education," thought her father with sorrow. "I suppose I forgot that though in so innocent a way, yet she lived wholly for herself when she was with me, and had nothing to teach her how to live for others. It seemed to be very lovely and harmless, that flower-like life of hers amongst the boughs and the birds. I suppose I forgot that it would not fit her for those colder realities which the selfishness of every man makes the woman suffer from when his affections desert her. And yet I tried to make her somewhat wiser, somewhat truer than most women are; and I used to think I had succeeded. He has undone my work very rapidly—he and the great world together."

Gladys meanwhile left him with a sense of injustice done to her.

The tender sympathy of Aubrey was more welcome to her than her father's uttered and implied censures. She felt what she had said—that it was of no use for her to be prodigal of her love for a man who was not so much ungrateful to it as he was, from indifference, unconscious of it.

"I care for him, but then he does not care for me!" she thought as she drove through the green twilight of the Ladysrood woods.

Who could help that? What effort could change a dead passion into a living one? Sooner would the buried bodies lying in the thyme-scented graveyard, which hung above the sea at Christslea, arise and walk.

CHAPTER II.

THE next day Aubrey left Ladysrood, and Guilderoy went to Paris for a week; at the end of the week their first circle of guests would arrive; at the end of the second week there were to come to them some royal personages, and with them the Duchess Sorla.

Gladys had five days of quiet and rural solitude before her. She spent them almost entirely with her father. When the great house was filled the life in it was more tedious to her even than London; her time still less her own; her patience and courtesy still more severely taxed. Whatever society might be to others, to her it seemed a treadmill never resting, a *camisole de force* never laid aside, a formula incessantly upon the lips, a conventional imposture never abandoned for a moment. She was a child still at heart, and all its ceremonies and etiquette and precedence were to her as the weight of her jewels and the length of her train had been to her at her first day at Court. Oh, for one sincere word in the midst of all those polished murmurs of compliment and calumny, and dissimulation, and veiled indecencies, and masked innuendo!—so she thought a hundred times a week in it.

Older women, women either colder in their affections or warmer in their passions, could find interest and excitement in its intrigues, and its conflicting and contrasting interests; they could move in it as in a

labyrinth of which they had the silken clue, they could play in it like movers of pawns and knights at chess.

But she could not find that distraction and compensation. There was something in her of her father's distaste for the hurry, the excitement, the falsity, the intrigue, and the incidents, trivial and serious, which make up the interest of modern society had no power to attract and absorb her.

In these few days preceding the arrival of her husband and her guests she was soothed and strengthened by the quiet country atmosphere, in that homeliness and tranquillity which had been about her from her cradle. When she was with her father, self-sacrifice and fortitude seemed still possible. In the feverishness of the world she lost her hold on them. He tried to make her see that there was nothing new in what she suffered from; nothing more than was usual and inevitable. He tried to imbue her with that toleration and indulgence which it is the hardest of all trials to attain in youth. He could add little that was new to what he had said when she had before consulted him; but that little he strove to put before her with sympathy and pity, though its philosophic reasonings seemed very cold to her.

To the imagination which pictures, and the heart which craves, richer, fuller, more complete joys than human passion and human possessions can ever bestow, the assurance that such perfection is but a dream, and that the passions can only be the flower of a day, appears a dreary creed which lays the whole world barren.

"My dear child," said Vernon, "you have only found what most women who know much about men do find, that the man they love is seldom either Achilles or

Hector, either Sydney or Montrose, either heroic or idealistic, but is generally rather like a sick and fractious child who cries for what he cannot get, and beats the hand which tries to soothe him."

She smiled but sadly.

"My dear, I only speak thus of my own sex, in their passions," he continued. "There are other things in life besides its passions, though I admit that there are none which colour it so deeply, or so infuse into it, irrevocably, bitterness or sweetness. But there are other things; it is in these other things that you should find your allies. Guilderoy is a man whose whole life should not be squandered in falling in love and falling out of love. He has position, opportunity, talent; he should have as time goes on some other aim than breaking the hearts of women, whether your yearn or those of others. It is with that side of his life that your alliance, your efforts, your interests, should be. Cannot you see that?"

"I cannot see what does not exist," said Gladys coldly. "He has no other object in life than his own pleasure. He says it is the only wise philosophy. I suppose it is, when you are rich enough to carry it out."

"It is the Epicurean; but what joy will there be in that without youth? He forgets; he makes no provision for age."

She was silent; age to her seemed so far off, that it was without shape or meaning in her eyes; her whole soul was centred in her present.

Her father looked at her. There were regret, anxiety, disquietude in the regard.

"Gladys," he said abruptly, "he told me once that he thought you were cold. You are not so. Far from

it. How have you given such an idea of you to a man who is your husband?"

She pulled some little branches of the sweet-briar hedge to her nervously. She did not reply.

"How?" repeated her father. "You must have failed to respond to him in some way? You must have disappointed him at some time? You must have shut your heart away from his gaze? Will you not answer me?"

Her head was turned from him and her voice trembled as she replied: "I so soon saw that he cared so little."

Everything seemed to her to be told in that.

"Are you sure that was not your fancy?"

"Quite sure."

"Even when you spoke to me that first day after your return four years ago? You remember?"

"Yes; even then."

She sighed impetuously.

"Even then," she repeated. "He had paid a great price for me and he regretted the price—just as he does again and again when he bids for a picture at Christie's, or the Hôtel Drouot, and it falls to him. The picture has never been painted which could satisfy him when he gets it home!"

Vernon echoed her sigh. It seemed to him hopeless to change a state of feeling built on caprice and on indifference, on a temperament as shifting as the sands, and a discontent grown out of self-indulgence. He looked at his daughter with irrepressible sadness.

It seemed such a little while ago that she had run along by that sweetbriar hedge in the sunshine, no

taller than itself, a happy, careless, fair-haired child, fresh as a "rose washed in a shower." And she was here a great lady, an unhappy woman; a jealous and almost deserted wife! He had foreseen it all himself, but his past prescience of it made its sorrow none the lighter.

Gladys sighed wearily.

Like all persons of poetic and ardent mind her ideals in youth had been high and romantic; the man who had knelt at her feet in the library of Ladysrood with the Horæ on her knee and the sunlight through the painted panes falling on his handsome head, had seemed to her, lover, knight, and hero all in one. And what had she found him? Only a master, negligent yet exacting; indifferent yet arbitrary; restless, hard to please, and quite impossible to content; who took his infinite social and personal charms elsewhere; who spent his time and his passions with others, and who considered that he had fulfilled all the obligations of his position to her, when he had given her his houses to direct and his family jewels to wear.

"Yes, my dear," John Vernon said in his own thoughts, silently answering her own silence, "you make the common mistake of all women. You think that the gift of yourself gives you claim to the man's eternal affections. It does not. It cannot. I know this seems harsh to you, and cruel. But it is the law of sex. Here and there are *âmes d'élite*, who suffice solely and wholly, physically and mentally, to each other; but they have not met early in life, and they have not married each other. Where marriage is hostile to love is, that it substitutes material gifts of worldly goods, worldly

position, gifts of houses and money and land, for the sweet spontaneous gifts of the passions and the affections. In savage races the man can treat his wife how he will, because he has given so many ponies, or cattle, or buffalo-skins, for her. In civilised life he feels in the same way that he has paid for her in material matters, and so is absolved from other and more spiritual payment. There is something to be said for the man's views, only where is the woman who will ever perceive or admit it?"

But all this he could not say to her.

"If you have living children you will be happier," he said aloud, as the only suggested consolation of which he could think.

Her face flushed, and she rose and pulled the shoots of the sweetbriar impetuously off their stalks.

"I shall never have children," she said in a low and sullen voice. "Do you suppose that I would live with him—without his love—only because he wishes for legitimate offspring? Cannot you understand? I have made him know that ever since—ever since—I first felt that he did not care for me."

"And he accepts the condition?"

"When I tell you that he does not care?"

The colour burned in her cheeks; a dark cloud of anger hung over the fairness of her face.

"One sees it in the world, I know," she continued: "women who go on bearing children year after year to men whom they know care nothing for them, but they must be without spirit or senses, or dignity or delicacy; they must be the wretched beasts of burden that your Griseldis was!"

Her father looked at her with infinite pain.

"It is worse than I thought," he said briefly. "I do not know how far he may be to blame; he has never opened his heart to me, and I cannot judge; but I do not think that you cherish the spirit which can bring happiness either to you or him. And I do not think that you have any right to refuse that natural burden of maternity which, however little you knew of life then, you still knew would be your portion if you married him."

"The moment that he has ceased to love me, he has set me free from all such obligations," she said passionately. "My little children lie in their graves. When I shall lie with them, he can have others by some other woman, who will be more grateful for his gifts and his position than am I."

"You pain me, Gladys," said Vernon, with a sigh.

"I cannot help it," she replied, selfish with that concentration of self which the sufferings of the heart and passions always entail.

"When I am with you," she said with the tears rising to her eyes, "I am in much what I used to be. I feel your influence. I believe as you believe in the power of self-sacrifice and patience. But I leave all the good you do me within this little gate. I cannot carry it out into the world. There I am only foolish, jealous, embittered, made cold or made wicked, one hour this, one hour that. In the world I see that women who are forsaken find consolation. Why should I not find it if I can? One of your classic writers says somewhere that a woman has always *one* power of vengeance. Sometimes I feel that I will try and reach his pride

with that, since I can touch in no better way his heart!"

Vernon was silent for some moments; he understood all the conflicting impulses at war within her, and he was at once too merciful and too wise to meet them with the empty conventional arguments of what is called in the world morality. He believed, like Aubrey, that it is only by the affections that women can or should be ever led.

"Other women have done that," he said at last, "and have repented it all their lives long. We cannot wound what we love without wounding ourselves more profoundly still; and to dishonour ourselves because we feel ourselves humiliated seems to me the act of madness; it would be as wise to cut our throats because the cold makes our hands ache on a winter's day. By what you tell me, you have set free your husband by your own choice; you cannot complain if he construes his liberty with a man's liberal and loose reading of the word. You have been too quick to consider yourself neglected, and too quick to repudiate your own obligations. You have beauty, you have youth, and you have the honour of the man you love, or have loved, in your hands. If with all this you can obtain no influence on him, and cannot rise to a higher level than that of your own personal affronts and suspicions, you are not what I thought you; and all the care and culture I have given to you, all the efforts I have made to render you in some little degree wiser and kinder than other women, have been lost. To feel that it is so will be the crowning disappointment of my life, which has been neither so tranquil nor so contented as others

think it. For I am mortal, and I have found, like all mortals, that 'life is a series of losses.' Do not let me lose you at least."

She was touched to the quick, if she was not convinced. The tears fell upon her father's hand as she kissed it.

But she promised nothing.

"Do not let us talk any more of this," said Vernon. "Feeling loses its force and its delicacy if we put it under the microscope too often, whether you be living or dead. I believe that you will always live your own life in such wise as I should most wish. In dishonouring yourself you would dishonour me; you will remember that. Let us go down to the shore. Nothing soothes one like the sound of the sea. Who has been mistaken enough to say that Nature was not loved in classic eyes? Why, all Greek and Latin verse is full of it, from the roar of the waves in Homer to the chaunt of the grasshopper in Meleager, and the birds singing in the rosemary of Tibullus!"

CHAPTER III.

VERNON was seated a few days later in the wicker chair of his garden, with a volume of Terence on his knee, and the dog at his feet, when the old woman in cotton kirtle and coalscuttle bonnet, who served as letter-carrier for some twelve miles round, brought him a packet of publishers' letters, and newspapers, and pamphlets, and one other letter in a hand unknown to

him, and enclosed in the thick blue paper which usually bespeaks a legal correspondence. When he read it he found himself the master of a modest little fortune. A very distant relation in the colonies, from whom he had had no communication for twenty years, and of whom he had scarcely ever known anything, had died childless, and had left him the proceeds of a long life of sheep-farming, "because he is the only honest man I have ever heard of," said this new Zealand Diogenes in his testament.

The letter of these lawyers, who were wholly strangers to him, moved him to a mingled emotion. He could not but be thankful that his future years, brief as they might be, would be freed from the *atræ curæ* of reliance on precarious literary labours; but his heart ached that this good news had not come earlier. A reluctant consent had been wrung from him to Gladys's marriage, principally because he knew that the state of his health might any day leave her without a protector, and that he had not means to bequeath to her any ease or elegance of life. This knowledge had made him conscious that he had no right to stand between his daughter and the brilliant and secure position offered to her, from mere romantic apprehensions which the future might never realise. But if this little fortune had come to him before the visit of Guilderoy, he would not have hesitated to place the test of long probation betwixt him and his desires. Alas! when fortune stretches out full hands, it is so often too late for her gifts to be of much use. Still he was thankful as he sat in the pale sunshine amidst the honeysuckle and sweetbriar of his cottage porch.

He loved learning with all a scholar's tender and delicate devotion, and it had often seemed to him almost a prostitution of it to turn his command of its treasures into a means of making money. A sentimentality the world would have called it, as it always calls so every better emotion in us.

As he sat thus he heard the rapid trot of horses' feet coming up the sandy lane, sunk low between high flowering hedges and banks which were in spring purple with violets.

"Someone from Ladysrood," he thought.

Ladysrood had become full of guests, and Vernon never consented to go there when there was a house party; he pleaded utter disuse of society, and distaste for it; and, indeed, few of the associates of Guilderoy had much in common with him. And he had an unchangeable resolution never to give any human being the right to say that he had gratified his own ambition, and secured his own interests, by his daughter's alliance.

"Why should you persist in remaining so aloof from us?" Guilderoy had said to him that same morning; and Vernon replied:

"Why should I renew acquaintance with the great world when it and I have been strangers so long? My life must seem to you like that of a snail or a mollusc, fastened under a cabbage-leaf or a ribbon weed. But it is a contented one. Can you say as much for yours?"

Guilderoy was at a loss what to answer.

"You are the only contented person I have ever met," he said evasively.

"I am content because I have done with expecta-

tion," replied Vernon. "What is discontent? Only desires which are incapable of fulfilment. I quite understand that the whole tenour of modern life inevitably produces it; that is why I live chiefly with the dead."

"A waste of your great intelligence, and a deprivation to those who appreciate your society," said Guilderoy.

"My dear Evelyn," said Vernon, "I am not vain enough to believe in your flattery. Whatever my intelligence may be worth I can put on paper, and if any really care for my society they can come to Christslea—as you come."

Guilderoy coloured a little. He was sensible that he came but seldom there. And yet he had great affection and admiration for John Vernon.

"It is a very great pity that he remains such a recluse," he said once to Aubrey, who replied: "You think my life distressingly wasted on the country. You think Vernon's distressingly wasted on solitude. He and I think yours distressingly wasted on pleasure. Which of the three of us is most right?"

"Probably we are all three extremely unwise to judge of, and for, others."

"That may very well be. Possibly, too, all life is more or less wasted because men, with all their studies, have never studied the secret of truly enjoying it. Possibly, too, Vernon in his hermitage is nearer doing so than either you or I."

But though he had never gone thither, those of the guests of Ladysrood who had learning enough to appreciate it often sought his society, and the little cottage under the apple orchards had become a sort of in-

tellectual Delphos to those men of genius and learning who were numbered amongst Guilderoy's friends. It was no one of these now, but Hilda Sunbury who lifted the latch of the little wooden gate and came under the wild rose boughs to him.

Having begun by hating him as an adventurer and an eccentric solitary, she had ended in admiring him and esteeming him. "The only really sensible man I ever met," she often averred.

Vernon, on his part, liked her; he appreciated her strong attachments and her strong common sense which yet so denied her those true charms, sympathy and the power of silence. She had now driven over alone, ostensibly to consult him about one of her sons, but in reality for another purpose. When she had spoken of her son, of politics, and of the weather, she hesitated a moment, and then said:

"Mr. Vernon, you and I have one common object and desire, the happiness of my brother and your daughter."

"Certainly, my dear lady," replied Vernon; "but if you mean that either you or I can do anything except wishing for it, you are greatly mistaken. I have told you so very often."

"A word in season surely——"

"Ah, no! It is just those words which are always most aggravating! I am sure you have some bad news for me. Spare me, and tell it quickly."

"I ought not to tell you at all. But you have heard of the Duchess Sorìa?"

"Never."

She gave him the outlines of the Duchess Sorìa's

past so far as it had been connected with her brother, and Vernon heard with impatience.

"It was broken off before his marriage, no doubt," he said. "Why rake amongst dead leaves?"

"Because leaves grow again."

"You mean——?"

"That Evelyn is more in love with this woman than he ever was before, and that she comes to Ladysrood to-morrow. Now what I wish to know is, shall you or I tell your daughter?"

Vernon heard with infinite pain.

"I knew how it would be," he murmured. "But I confess it is sooner than even I thought. My child is worth more than that. Perhaps you mistake."

"I never mistake," she replied, with hauteur; "and if I sacrifice the reputation of my brother to you, it is out of sincere regard for your daughter."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Whatever you deem best. She must certainly not be left to remain in ignorance to receive Beatrice Soria——"

Vernon sighed.

"Dear madam, it is only ignorance—unless most wondrous and perfect patience—which enables any woman to endure her married life at all."

"You mean, then, you would leave her in ignorance?"

"Yes. What good could knowledge do if it be as you think?"

"Good heavens! Surely there is such a thing as self-respect?"

"Yes; my child will always have self-respect, for

she will never, I am convinced, do anything to lose the respect of others. Self-respect does not consist in making violent scenes, or ill-judged reproaches, or discoveries which are for ever fatal to peace."

"You take the insult to your daughter strangely quietly."

"I have known the world in my time, my dear madam, and I read your brother's character before he had been ten minutes in my study; it is not a character from which any woman can expect constancy. I thought, however, that he was a gentleman; if he is as insincere and as unscrupulous as you describe he is not one."

"Not a gentleman!"

Lady Sunbury flushed crimson, and rose in bitter anger.

"Not if what you tell me is true."

"I did not tell you that he might be abused, but argued with; and that your daughter might be warned and counselled."

John Vernon sighed wearily.

"Dear Lady Sunbury, you and I both spent all our intelligence in warnings and in counsels before this marriage took place. Action, now that it has taken place, would be worse than useless."

"My intentions are misunderstood," said his visitor coldly. "All my inclinations would, of course, lie towards screening and excusing my brother. But I thank God that I have never allowed mere inclination to be the guide of my conduct. I believe in duty, though I know the world of our day ridicules and despises me, and my sense of duty made me feel that I could not

allow my sister-in-law ignorantly to receive her most formidable rival."

"I thank you for your feeling for Gladys," said Vernon, with emotion. "But neither you nor I should do any good in lifting the band off her eyes; it will fall soon enough of itself. Besides—pardon me—you cannot tell that Guilderoy's feelings have revived for this lady. He cannot have told you, I presume?"

"He has not told me, certainly. But I have always taken means to be aware of my brother's actions, and I know that all relations are renewed between him and the Duchess Sorìa."

Vernon covered his eyes from the sun with one hand. The calm sweet light and the gay song of the mavises in the adjacent orchard hurt him.

"It is very sad if true," he said at last. "But interference were worse than useless. It would only confirm your brother in his infidelity, and inspire in my daughter a resentment which she could never forget. Dear madam, believe me, marriage is a difficult thing. But, as law stands, we cannot undo one once contracted without publicity, comment, interrogation, every indignity which it is most frightful for either a proud or a delicate nature to provoke. What then remains? Only to leave such peace as there is in it undisturbed as long as we can. I know that you believe in the advantages of interference. I do not. When we are sure to do any possible good by it, it is a dangerous meddling with fates not our own. When we cannot even be sure of so much as that, we certainly cannot dare to attempt anything. Your brother's wish for my daughter's hand was, as you know, most unwelcome to

me, because I knew that he had not the stability, nor she the experience, to make happiness between them possible. But since, unhappily, she *is* his wife, she shall not, I promise you, whilst I live, allow either passion or injury to fling his name to the howling calumnies and cruelties of the world; not whilst I live."

There was a great sadness in the three last words, and he sighed as he said them.

"When I am gone, be kind to her," he added.

"Where are you going?"

"Where we must all go."

Hilda Sunbury looked at him in surprise and wonder.

"Why should you speak so? You are as likely to live as she or I. You are in the full vigour and flower of your intellect."

John Vernon smiled.

"Of my intellect, perhaps; but, unhappily, living is a physical question, and when the body succumbs the light of the mind goes out too. I have always thought it the greatest argument for the immortality of the soul, for it is really ridiculous to suppose that the hemlock could really destroy such a mind as Socrates, or that the genius which created Ariel and Caliban can have been killed for ever because Warwickshire leeches in the Elizabethan days were fools. Plato, indeed——"

Lady Sunbury rose in evident irritation. "Socrates and Plato! Good heavens, Mr. Vernon, how can you possibly think of such people when I have just told you, at the greatest pain to myself, and perhaps even disloyalty to my brother, of what wrong is being done to your only child!"

"My dear madam," said Vernon wearily, "if my

child ultimately succeeds in keeping the honour of your brother's name intact, and bearing her own pain and dishonour in silence, she will owe it to that which I have told her in childhood of those two dear dead friends of mine. Perhaps you have never read the 'Apology' or the 'Crito'? Horace has said that a new amphora keeps long the odour of the first wine poured in it; and as it is with the earthen vase, so is it with the human mind in youth."

Lady Sunbury left the garden of Christslea with offence.

She reflected that it was always wholly useless to look for practical wisdom from the student of books.

She had been born with an ungovernable love of interference with the affairs of others. She believed so conscientiously in the excellence of her intentions, that she was sincerely ignorant of the curiosity, love of authority, and many another personal motive, which were continually moving her to interfere to govern the destinies and to correct the errors of others. Her detestation of the Duchess Sorìa had been to the full as potent in her present action as her anger with Guilderooy and her indignation for the wrongs of his wife. Like many another woman of energy and exclusive attachments, she could not resist the feeling that she had been appointed by Providence to watch over, and save from themselves, all those who belonged to her; and though this view of her mission had never yet had any other result than to alienate and weary those whom she desired to serve, and frequently to hasten their descent down that path which she sought to prevent them from ever following, yet she never could so alter her nature

as to refrain from making the attempt. Her husband hated, her sons feared, and her brother often avoided her in consequence, but no power on earth would ever have persuaded her that her failure to influence them arose from her own fault. Alas! most people carry about with them a lanthorn like Diogenes, but they are for ever flashing its rays into the faces and the souls of others; they do not remember to turn its light inward.

Lady Sunbury indeed knew—no one better—that a woman can no more restrain a man from inconstancy than she can restrain the breakers of the sea from rolling up on to the shore. She knew, too, by her own experience, that rebuke, reproach, expostulation, publicity, only increase the evils against which they passionately protest. But she did not choose to remember anything of what she knew. She was only ready to blame her brother's wife for too passive acquiescence, as she would have blamed her had she had recourse to any violent indignation. She could not pardon her for having gained no influence over Guilderoy, even as she would never have forgiven her had she succeeded in gaining any. She knew that her sister-in-law was unhappy, and that such unhappiness was at her age perilous in every kind of way; but yet she was rather impatient of her and critical of her than compassionate. If she were not a simpleton she was wicked, quite wicked, not to take such measures as would save her husband from unfaithfulness and herself from sorrow.

And she, who had forgotten the saying that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread," or else never imagined by any possibility that she could be classed with fools, drove rapidly home to Ladysrood, where a

large party was staying as well as herself. "It will be very difficult to see her alone," she thought, "but I will try."

As it chanced, Guilderoy was out riding with several of his friends; the remainder of the guests were sitting, sauntering, or playing afternoon games in the west gardens. There was a large table spread under one of the great chestnuts, where servants were serving tea, ices, fruits, wines, strawberries and cream, everything that was wished for or imagined. Gladys was performing that part of mistress of a great house which had now become second nature to her, but which never ceased to oppress and fatigue her with its tedium.

Society, like all other pursuits of life, requires to have an object in it to be interesting. She had no object; it did not seem to her that anything of interest could possibly arise in her life. She had pain in it, and a jealousy for which she contemned herself, but these had both become so familiar by habit that she had ceased to expect ever to be free from them. Her want of interest in what went on around her gave her a listless air, which all her really sincere efforts to be kind and courteous could not repair. People felt that they were indifferent to her, that they bored her, that she would have preferred their absence to their presence, and there were many whose vanity made them bitterly resent this. She was moving now from one group to another, doing her best to be amused by what so greatly amused every one else, and failing entirely to be so. She wore a Gainsborough hat, with long feathers drooping to her shoulders; she had on a white frock of very soft embroidered gauze tissue, and

a great sash of broad pale blue ribbon was fastened at the side.

"She is really a lovely creature," thought her sister-in-law; "how wild he would be about her were she only some one else's wife!"

Lady Sunbury joined the groups under the chestnuts and bided her time. It was still early. There was a great deal of laughter and flirtation and general diversion, the air was balmy, and the gardens delightful. Some one asked if they might dance, the lawn was so smooth; the lady of Ladysrood assented; the musicians, who were always in the house, were sent for, and stationed where they were not seen behind thickets of rhododendron; the people began to dance.

Gladys and Lady Sunbury were left almost alone.

"How strange that they can care for *that!*" said the former, with dreamy contempt, as she watched the valsers moving round.

"How I wish you cared for it, my dear!" said Lady Sunbury. "How I wish you cared for anything."

"Do you?" Gladys looked suddenly at her with a strange expression in her eyes.

"Certainly I do," said her sister-in-law. "You would be so much happier if you were—were—interested in what goes on around you."

"I am very often interested; I am not often pleased."

"What does she mean?" thought Lady Sunbury.

"I wanted to say something to you for a moment in private. Could we go a little apart, do you think? They are all dancing."

"Oh yes. They will not miss me."

She moved away from the gaiety of the scene into

a walk known as the King's Alley, because Charles Stuart had paced up and down it in the dark days between Oxford and Whitehall. It was a green walk enclosed on either side with tall walls of clipped yew, above which stretched and met the boughs of massive beeches. It was sequestered and out of earshot, though the music of the waltz came to them on the air as they paced down it.

"You care for your father?" said Lady Sunbury.

"Ah!" It was an ejaculation rather than a word, but the whole love of a lifetime was in it. "It is no ill of him you want to say, is it?"

"Oh no," said her sister-in-law. "I went to see him this afternoon. I wanted him to tell you something which must be told you. But he refused."

"Be sure that it should not be told at all, then," said Gladys coldly.

"Mr. Vernon is not infallible," replied Hilda Sunbury, growing angered. "I consider that it should be told, and I am the best judge of what is or is not for the honour of my family. I do not wish you to receive the Duchess Sorìa."

Gladys stood still and looked at her.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because—because my brother was her friend—more than her friend—before his marriage."

"My dear Lady Sunbury," said her brother's wife very calmly, "if I am to decline to know all the women whom your brother honoured in that manner, I shall have to make great excisions in my visiting list."

"Good heavens! Can you make a jest of it?"

"No; God knows that is farthest from my thoughts."

But the world would make a jest of him if I acted on your advice."

"Do you mean to say that you were aware of what his relations were with Beatrice Sorìa? and what they have again become?"

Gladys grew very pale.

"I knew there was something—some one—it does not matter who—it is not the first time."

Her voice was faint with pain, but her face was calm.

"Are you sure that it is Mme. Sorìa?" she asked after a moment's pause.

"Perfectly sure. You cannot let her come here; you must make Evelyn understand that. I speak as I do for your honour and his."

"Or for our estrangement," thought Gladys bitterly.

"My father said I was not to be told this?" she inquired.

"Yes; he said it could do no good. He did not appreciate my motives, my sense of duty."

"Neither do I," said Gladys abruptly; and she began to walk on under the beechen shadows.

"I am sorry that you do not," said Lady Sunbury sternly. "You are nothing to me, and my brother is much. But I could not see a wrong done to you under your own roof while I could save you from it by a word of warning. It was useless to speak to Guilderoy; he is self-willed, careless, obdurate, where his fancies are involved. I deemed it best to put you on your guard. If *you* tell him you refuse to receive the Duchess Sorìa he will be compelled to acquiesce, and he will not ask your reasons and he will be saved from the world's condemnation."

Gladys said nothing in answer. She continued to pace the alley with agitated, quickened steps.

"Have you a personal dislike to Mme. Soría?" she asked abruptly.

"That is a very unworthy insinuation," replied her sister-in-law with hauteur. "This much I will say of her—she is the only woman on earth who ever really influenced my brother. You must be aware that you yourself have no more influence over him than if you were a statue; of course I do not know whether that is his fault or yours."

Each one of the words went to the heart of the hearer as if it had been a stab with a knife. Had it been her fault? Her father also had seemed to think so. Her sister-in-law evidently thought so. What did women do to retain the passion and elicit the confidence of men? She could not tell. Who could put in her possession the secret of that marvellous talisman? She turned to her companion with composure, though her lips were very pale:

"I have no doubt you mean well, though you might find it hard work to persuade Lord Guilderoys that you do so. Mme. Soría does not come for three days. In the morning I will go to Christslea and consult my father."

"Your father will certainly counsel you to keep the *rôle* of Griseldis," said Lady Sunbury with ill-repressed rage and violence.

Gladys' face flushed painfully.

"If I do keep it," she said with bitterness, "it is certainly the members of your house who should be grateful to me."

Then she walked with quick firm steps away from her sister-in-law, out of the shade of the beech-alley, and towards the dancers in the sunlight on the lawn.

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN VERNON having accompanied his visitor to her carriage, had walked slowly back to his little house. He had felt infinitely more emotion than he had shown to her, for although not unexpected, the tidings she had brought to him had been none the less cruel. And he felt, as he had said to her, that all intervention would be useless, worse than useless. When two lives are drifting apart, their own regrets or relentings can yet unite them, but the interference of any other can only send them wider asunder.

He sat down again in his willow chair, with the sunshine about him and the bees buzzing in the honeysuckles. His left hand was still closed unconsciously on the letter from his dead cousin's lawyers. The emotions of pleasure and pain had exhausted him; they were the perils against which he had always been warned. His tranquil life amongst his books had alone preserved so long his fragile cord of life.

As he looked at the gay sunshine with the gnats and flies dancing in it, the tangle of green boughs through which the blue of the sea was shining, the fragrant sweetbriar and southernwood where two little blue tomtits were flitting, to him there seemed so much—ah, how much!—that was unutterably beautiful in

existence. Why would youth and manhood fret themselves away in the fierce and heated furnace of passions which were no sooner attained and enjoyed than they lost all power to charm? If youth would only believe how much else there is to enjoy! If age, which does know, had not lost the power to enjoy all!

“*Si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait!*” he murmured, in the old trite true sad words of human existence which has no sooner time to learn its secret than it has to pass away where there is no more use for its hardly acquired knowledge. What cruelty and mockery there were in this brief saying. If he could only put his own knowledge, his own patience, his own experience into the heart of his child!

He felt tired and sad, and the pleasantness of the little gift of Fortune which had come to him was forgotten in an aching anxiety for the fate of one dearer than himself.

“If she be ever forced to leave him,” he thought, “she will be too proud to keep her dowry, she will have this to live on; it is well so far.”

The afternoon was very warm and sultry; there was no sound but of the buzzing of the bees and the murmur of the sea on the shore. He listened to that sound, which seemed like the beating of the heart of Nature.

“If we could listen more to that, and less to our own, we should be happier while we live and readier for death,” he thought, as he leaned his head back in the chair and closed his eyes. He felt very weary. He rested there very quietly.

The hours passed, and the sun sunk down, and the

little birds in the sweetbriar and southernwood began to think of their bedtime, safe under their abode of leaves.

The dog at his feet looked anxiously up at him from time to time. The reflection from the setting sun shone on his face, which was very white and very calm, and there, when the shadows of the evening came about him, his old servant found him sleeping. He had died in his sleep, without a pang. There was the shadow of a smile on his pale lips.

He had gone in peace to the great majority, whither had gone before him the great souls whom he had loved in life.

CHAPTER V.

AT Ladysrood the long dinner was over by half an hour; the drawing-rooms were filled with gay groups; there was the sound of pleasant laughter and of sweet voices, and of the beautiful melody of Wagner's Spinning Chorus, which was scarcely listened to or heeded by any one. In the midst of that soft animation and polished mirth, the groom of the chambers, bending low to his master, murmured an almost inaudible word; Guilderoy grew very pale, and with a hurried phrase of apology, left his guests. In the library he found the old gardener of Christslea, who had come thither to tell him that John Vernon was dead.

"God forgive me!" was his first thought. "Will *he* ever forgive me if he be gone where he can know all?"

CHAPTER VI.

"My child, you and I have lost the best friend we had on earth. Let us endeavour to live together as he would most have wished us to do," said Guilderoy with sincere emotion, when he had left all that was mortal of John Vernon in the little graveyard by the sea at Christslea.

She sighed; she did not respond.

The party at Ladysrood had of course been broken up immediately, and there was no question for the moment of the arrival of the Duchess Soria. Of the personal impatience which he felt at this disappointment to himself Guilderoy gave no sign to his wife. He was sincerely sorry for her, and he forbore from any kind of word or hint which could have added to her sorrow. He was for the first time in his life wholly unselfish. But the consciousness that he was doing his duty did not prevent the tedium of those solitary days of mourning from weighing heavily on his spirits, and taxing his patience cruelly. He was wholly unused to either the sensation or the spectacle of pain.

In the overwhelming shock and grief to her of her father's death, all other memories and feelings had been for the time forgotten or thrust aside. Guilderoy had shown to her in her suffering a genuine tenderness and sympathy which had been wholly unaffected, as he himself bitterly regretted the loss of one whom he had

regarded with affection, and whose loss was irreparable he knew to her, perhaps to them both. The cottage at Christslea had been the one temple of peace in which neither of them would ever have been ashamed to confess error and seek reconciliation. But John Vernon was dead, and all that remained to them of him were his books and papers, his written and printed thoughts, and the letter which had been found in his dead hand.

He was moved to greater regret when he read and arranged the innumerable papers which Vernon had left behind him, and felt conscious, at every line, of how much nobility of mind and rich maturity of intellect were quenched for ever under the wild thyme and moss which covered the little burial-place where he lay.

Guilderoy did not share that hope which sustained the souls of Socrates and Plato, and which the soul of John Vernon had drunk in from theirs. To him it seemed that *quand on est mort, c'est pour longtemps*: a time so long that it stretches on to all which mortals can conceive as for ever. And his eyes were often wet with tears as he turned over the manuscripts of his dead friend.

The sincerity of his own sorrow did not diminish the intolerable sense of dreariness with which these late summer weeks at Ladysrood filled him. On the contrary, he became impatient, even of his own regrets: he was so wholly unused to harbour as a guest any thought or emotion which was not pleasurable that he resented his own pain.

These long silent summer hours in this house of mourning, with the figure of Gladys in its long black robes always before him, and no other distraction pos-

sible, tried almost beyond endurance the good resolutions which he had silently formed as he looked on the pale serene countenance of Vernon lying in his last sleep on his narrow bed, with the lattice of his chamber open to the blue sky, the twittering birds, the quivering leaves, the murmurous sea.

A man of his temperament is quickly touched to fine issues, to honest regrets, to tender resolves; but there is no power on earth which can secure his adhesion to them.

He showed her the most sincere sympathy in her grief, and was even perfectly patient with its intensity and long duration. He had felt the truest admiration and attachment on his own part for her father, and had always felt that Vernon would do much to smooth and dissipate any difficulty which might arise between himself and her. The philosophical, indulgent, and temperate influence of such a mind had had a sway over himself which he knew to be the most beneficial he had ever felt. It left a painful void even in his own life to feel that that wise and serene friend had for ever passed out of sight and hearing.

Earlier, ever so little earlier, she would have responded to his efforts; the frost of her heart would have melted under the first sunbeam of a kind word; but now the remembrance of what his sister had told her was ever dominant. It haunted her night and day; guided by its cruel indications, she realised a thousand words and signs which were confirmation true. She recollected that her husband's abandonment of the colonial adventuress had been contemporary with the arrival of the Duchess Soría in England. His desire

that she should be invited to Ladysrood; his tone in speaking of her; his preoccupation and visible anxiety for her pleasure and her presence—all these recurred to her memory with overwhelming and indisputable testimony to the truth of Hilda Sunbury's words.

Hilda Sunbury herself had felt a pang very kindred to remorse when she heard where she stood in the brilliant drawing-room of Ladysrood, that Vernon had been found dead after sunset. Perhaps she had hastened his end; she knew that she had distressed him, and there was constantly sounding in her ear his bidding, "Be kind to her." Had it been kind to have said what she had said to her brother's wife? Would it not have been well if she had obeyed the dead man's caution and counsel? Her conscience told her that it would; and she was glad to excuse herself to Guilderoy, and hasten from his house on a plea of urgent matters needing her presence at her own home.

She was uneasy at what she had herself done; she was sensible that it had been neither wise nor laudable; that whatever she knew or thought she knew should have been kept in her own breast. But she had been unable to help a restless desire to have her share of influence in the life at Ladysrood, and though she was not conscious of it, unity between her brother and his wife would have been intolerable to her. She had never been able to pardon the manner in which, from the very first hour, so very young a woman as Gladys had passively avoided her efforts at direction and tacitly rejected her suggestions. From the moment she had presented her at Court, she had felt that her brother's wife would yield to her in nothing.

"Then she is all alone in the world henceforward!" said Aubrey, when he heard of John Vernon's death.

"Alone! How can you talk in such a manner?" said Lady Sunbury, greatly annoyed. In herself she blamed her brother endlessly and pitilessly; but she would have resented as the greatest of personal insults a hint from any one else that he was ever so slightly blameable.

"I know no one more entirely alone," said Aubrey, very gravely.

"Will you console her solitude?" it was on Lady Sunbury's lips to ask; but the respect she had for her cousin, both as a man and as a statesman, restrained her for once from an unpleasant and imprudent utterance.

"Her father might possibly have restrained her from follies!" she observed instead.

"Is she disposed towards folly?" asked Aubrey. "I have seen few women so young so wise."

"You admire all she does!"

"I confess I think she conducts herself, in what are frequently very difficult circumstances, with great tact, and forbearance very unusual in any one of her years. I think she is far from blind to Evelyn's caprices, but she has the good sense to affect to be so."

"It is the least she can do in return for all he has done for her."

"My dear Hilda, what a vulgar sentiment! If he had not married her, men quite as good as he would have done so."

"Would *you*?" asked Lady Sunbury with her most unpleasant expression and accent.

Aubrey raised his languid eyelids and looked her full in the face.

"If I had happened to meet her—yes," he replied coldly.

"He is in love with her!" thought his cousin, outraged and disgusted; and she began to meditate as to how far it was possible to give any hint of it to Guilderoy.

In a few weeks the solitude grew unendurable to him. He was wholly unused not to have the voices of the world around him, and the constant sight of a sorrow which he could do nothing to relieve depressed and distressed him beyond endurance. A heartless man would have felt it much less, but Guilderoy was never heartless, though he frequently made the hearts of others ache.

Even a great passion, if he had been capable of it, would have found him after its first ecstasies easily diverted from it by the attractions of minor emotions and of passing interests.

Life had been full of pleasant temptations to him, and he had never acquired the habit of avoiding these or of keeping steadfastly to any path.

He could do nothing to console her. She abandoned herself to her grief with a forgetfulness of all else which was in its way as selfish as was his desire to get away from the sight of her grief. Her father had been the centre and support of her whole life; she reproached herself passionately with having ever believed that she was unhappy so long as the sweetness and wisdom of his life were with her.

He grew impatient of seclusion and the sight of

sorrow. She was too young to be left by herself, and she had no relatives who could be invited to remain with her. Between his sister and herself he knew that little harmony or sympathy existed.

"If you would come away somewhere it would distract you; there are many countries you have never seen. I will take you where you choose; a voyage might do much to calm you," he said to her one morning in the seventh week after Vernon's death. But she could not be persuaded to leave Ladysrood, and made her daily pilgrimage to the grave at Christslea.

"I cannot go into the world; do not ask me," she said again and again to him. "Go you, if you wish."

"Remember that you are the first to suggest it," he replied.

Not pleased at the permission given him, though longing for the liberty which it awarded, he added with hesitation:

"The world will think it strange if I leave you so soon."

"What does that matter?" she said, unconsciously repeating Socrates' question: "Is it worth while to think so much of the opinion of others?"

"I have no wish for my friends to suppose that I am unkind or that you are deserted," said Guilderoy, impatiently. "You have already, my dear, had a certain manner, a certain air, which have suggested as much to some people. I quite understand how wretched you feel under this irreparable loss, but I have never understood why you always looked so little happy before it. Very few women would quarrel with the life you lead. And if you have any wishes of which I am unaware

you have only to name them. They shall be gratified."

"You are very good."

"That is not the language which you should use to me. It is language ridiculous in the relations we bear to one another. There is no question of goodness. You are my wife, and it is my pleasure as well as my right to give you whatever it may be in my power to give."

"Is fidelity in your power?"

She looked him full in the eyes as she spoke. She was standing before him in the sunshine; her black gown fell about her in long slim severe folds, her face was pale with long weeping, and there were dark circles under her eyes. There was a look on her face wistful and yet resolute, pathetic and yet stern.

"Fidelity!" repeated Guilderoy.

It was a strange inquiry, and one which left him at a loss to answer it. "Who has been talking to her?" he wondered.

She looked at him with the same unchanging gaze, and her eyes tried to read his very soul.

"Have you been faithful to me?" she asked. "I will believe you if you say that you have."

"My dear!" He was embarrassed and unnerved; he felt his face grow warm; a hot flush rose in his cheeks, his eyes avoided hers, and he hesitated to reply. "Why do you ask such questions?" he said with petulance. "No man ever tells the truth in reply to them."

"You have told it to me now," said Gladys, coldly; and she said nothing more.

She stood quite still, and looked at him; and he avoided her gaze.

"And the Duchess Sorìa!" she asked. "Is it true that you wished me to invite her here, because——"

He interrupted her passionately.

"Hush! I forbid you to speak her name to me!"

"Why? Because you have loved her?"

"Because she is the only woman I have really loved in all my life. God help me!"

There was that sound of true and passionate feeling in his voice which she had never heard from him for herself; such a tone is unmistakable, is irresistible; it carries its own truth and its own secret with it in overwhelming witness to the most unwilling ear.

"*Vous l'avez voulu!*" he said with violence. "It is always so with women. One spares them—would screen them—would keep them in peace—and they will not be content with that. They will ask and suspect, and prate and irritate, until they are wounded by the very thing they need have never known, but for their own insatiate curiosity, their own restless and unpitying jealousy! It is always so!"

He was passionately angered; angered with himself because he had betrayed a secret which did not only concern himself, and angered with her because she had driven him into one of those positions in which a man must dishonour himself in his own sight, either by falsehood or confession.

"If you loved her, why did you affect to love me?" she asked.

Her voice and her attitude were unnaturally calm,

but her eyes had a look in them which he did not care to meet.

"I affected nothing!" he answered with entire sincerity. "I thought I loved you; I thought at least that I loved you enough to be happy with you. They always say the happiest marriages are passionless. I was entirely honest in all I said to you and in all I said to your father. I never told you that I had not loved other women; I never told you that I should not love others. No man can give those pledges if he is sincere in what he says."

He spoke with force and warmth and perfect truth; whether he were wrong or right in what he said, he believed in his own words, and he intended neither subterfuge nor apology. He honestly regretted the pain which he inflicted, and he was wholly candid in the expressions of his own emotions. They were things which he had long thought, long felt, but which he would never have said to her unless she had forced him to it by injudicious interrogation. He had been willing to keep her in the calm outer courts of courteous intercourse and social conventionalities; if she had forced her way, despite him, into the hidden recesses of his soul, she could not blame him if she found another name the talisman there and not her own.

"I have never intentionally spoken an unkind word to you," he went on after a moment's silence. "I have been delighted to gratify all fancies and wishes that you ever expressed, or that I could ever divine. You have not had that pliability and amiability which one looked for from one so young; but I have never uttered a word to any living being which could allow them to

imagine that I blamed you. I have given you every outward respect, every possible consideration; if you have not known how, or have not cared, to win my affections and my confidence, I think I am justified in saying that is not more my fault than it is yours. Love cannot be stoned, or bullied, or worried into existence or duration. All women forget that too often."

He rose and walked impatiently to and fro for a few moments.

She stood quite still in the same attitude; she was very pale, otherwise she betrayed no emotion.

"I regret that you have forced me to say those things," he said, after a moment's silence. "They are always painful to the speaker and the hearer alike, and no possible good can ever come from agitating and embittering scenes. Such scenes are the abhorrence of my life. Every man loathes them, and I most of all. In our position no possible good can come from mutual recrimination. Between lovers such disputes may be the resurrection of a buried love. But between people who are bound together merely by honour, interest, and society, they can only produce the most fatal estrangement. I have wished honestly that you should be happy, and if you are not so, it is as much my misfortune as it is yours. It may be also my fault. I do not say that it is not. But it is a fault of temperament, and not of will."

He waited for some answer from her, but she said nothing.

She stood with one hand resting on the marble column, and she might have been made herself of marble, so still and so cold she seemed.

He waited a moment more, looked at her in hesitation; then, with a bow, passed and left her. He knew that he had said what could not be effaced from her memory, and what must for ever be like a barrier of ice between them. Yet if even in that moment she had touched his heart or his conscience in any way, if she had shown anything of that warmth and tenderness which are the very life-blood of a woman's love, he would have been ready to meet it so far as his feelings could have been controlled to meet it. He would have been ready to say to her, "We are both sacrificed to the mistaken laws of the world; let us pity each other and bear with each other, and be friends if we can be nothing more."

But she had said nothing; and she had kept that attitude of coldness, of disdain, of offence, which had in it neither invitation nor indulgence. She had no compassion because she had no comprehension; and she had been so wholly absorbed in the intensity of her own pain that she had had no knowledge that it might still have been possible to save something from this wreck of all her hopes. When women see the treasure of their lives founder they drown with it. They do not even try to save what they might.

Guilderoy did not seek to explain or to apologise. His conscience was stung, and he was angered with himself for having been betrayed into such embarrassment. What idiots women were! always seeking to know things which made their misery when known, never letting well alone, never accepting the conventional untruths with which any well-bred man is careful to cover his errors, always breaking with rash steps the

thin ice which alone separates them from the bottomless waters of suspicion and jealousy!

He paced to and fro the west terrace with anger and a kind of contrition in his thoughts. Why would she ask those home questions? Why would she try to penetrate his very soul with the gaze of her great, luminous, serious eyes? Why could she not take all he gave her, his kindliness, his respect, his courtesy, his outward observance, his occasional embraces, and not endeavour to probe further into the secrecies of his inner life, and the mysteries of the male passions?

Good heavens! Had she not a life full enough, brilliant enough, envied enough, to occupy her and content her without her requiring his erotic fidelity as though he were some sighing Strephon to her maiden Chloris? Why would women always make themselves wretched by demanding the impossible, and trying to enter the closed chambers of men's follies?

"And I was really willing to endeavour to be to her what Vernon would have wished," he thought with a sense of injustice done to himself.

Why were women always like that? always rejecting the pearls you brought them because you would not, or could not, give them a roc's egg?

"Marriage is such a totally different thing to what she thinks it," he said to himself. "It is a community of interests; a union of externals, a method of continuing the race and of consolidating property; it is not a lifelong worship of Eros with an eternal song of 'O! Hymen, Hymenæe!'"

He was incensed, and nursed his fiction of injustice

to himself, not to look closer at the injustice to her of which his conscience whispered.

It was the same season of the year, almost the same day of the month, as that on which he had first spoken to his sister of his intention to marry John Vernon's daughter. Good heavens! Why had he given away liberty and peace and independence of action only because a child had had a lovely face, like a picture by Romney, and because he had had vague impressions that he wished his own sons to reign after him at Ladysrood? Into what irrevocable imprisonment had not his senses and his sentimentality hurried him!

But who could ever have supposed that a woman so young, and reared in such rural seclusion, would have had so much penetration, so much prescience, so much worldly wisdom, and such obstinate refusal to be deceived?

"I have always been most careful to show her every outward respect," he thought; and it seemed to him that she was unreasonable, and he himself harshly treated. He would always have liked her, always have felt affection for her, if she had only been more facile, more pliant, more easily moulded to what he required.

What could it matter to her if his fancies went elsewhere? He could not see that it really mattered anything.

If there were any very great scandal, if he left her openly for any one, if he insulted her in public by admiration for some actress or some adventuress, then he could have understood that she would have felt wronged, and the world would have been with her.

But as it was, as he had always been careful to do none of these things, he could not admit to himself that she had any injury at all.

He had remained beside her entirely out of sympathy and good feeling, he had honestly desired to regulate their future lives to be in accord and outward harmony, if in no deeper tenderness, and his only reward had been that she had asked him a direct and intolerable question which he had been too honest a gentleman to answer with a lie!

He was profoundly angered, the more profoundly because his inner consciousness was not blameless. If he had loved her, most probably he would have sought her, have thrown himself at her feet, and confessed his infidelities; but it is only men who love very tenderly who are thus repentant, and he had no kind of love for her. The little he had ever had had died out after six months' possession.

As it was he went into his library, wrote her a brief note, and giving a few orders to his body-servant to follow him, he had his horse brought round and rode over the moors to the nearest railway. His note merely said:

MY DEAR GLADYS,—It will be as well for us not to see one another for a little while. You are mistress of yourself and of Ladysrood. I shall probably go to Aix-les-Bains. If you will address to me at the Embassy in Paris, I will tell them to forward my letters as I am not quite sure whither I may turn my steps. I hope to find you in better health on my return. You

cannot doubt my profound sympathy in the loss you have sustained.

“Ever yours,

“EVELYN.”

The note, when he wrote it, seemed to him a masterpiece of courtesy, kindness, dignity, and implied rebuke.

It seemed to her, when she received it, the acme of indifference, negligence, heartlessness, and insult. It was in real truth neither the one nor the other, being the mere announcement of the fact of his departure, with the other fact of his annoyance and offence conveyed through its conventional words.

CHAPTER VII.

AT that same hour Guilderoy was alone for a few instants with the Duchess Sorla in one of the wooded paths of Aix.

He had spent his utmost ingenuity in the effort to obtain an unwitnessed interview with her, and had failed, utterly failed, as he had done in England. The place was filled with her acquaintances, men, who were as assiduous as he in devotion to her, constantly surrounded her; and she never received him at her own apartments when she had not her friends about her. She desired to give, and succeeded in giving, him the sense that it were easier to uproot the rocks and hills around than to recover any one of the privileges which

he had of his act and will forfeited. His assiduity in attendance on her gave rise to many comments amongst the lingering idlers of the autumn season, which he would have resented had he dreamed of them. But he did not even spare a thought to the observation of which he was the subject, and his whole mind was centered in the endeavour to break through the barrier of friendly, but never intimate, association with her: a barrier much more difficult to break through than any estrangement or coldness would have created. Those would have afforded permission for remonstrance or entreaty; the serene courtesy with which she invariably received him relegated him without appeal to the position of a mere acquaintance. It was well nigh impossible to reproach a woman whom he had forsaken, for being sufficiently forgiving and kind to condone such an offence, and yet he would have been less discouraged by the most marked resentment than he was by this placid courtesy. It was not like her disposition as he remembered it; it was not in accordance with anything of her character as he had known it.

Rumour attributed to her the intention of allying herself anew with a Russian of exalted rank, who had followed her to Aix, and who made no secret to the world of his homage; and Guilderoy suffered all the tortures of that impotent jealousy which he had once so carelessly inflicted on her, and had pitied so little in her.

In the perplexity and perturbation of his various emotions, his thoughts seldom went to Ladysrood: when they did so they were mingled with as much of displeasure as of self-reproach. The waywardness of his

pride made him consider that his wife owed apology to him and must be the first to approach him. Meanwhile he was glad of that cessation of correspondence which to her seemed so tragic and so terrible, but to him appeared but of slight moment. His whole intelligence and volition were for the moment absorbed in the effort to compel some revelation of her real thoughts from the Duchess Soria. He was well used to meet on terms of polite indifference women in whose book of life he had written the tenderest pages; to greet with pleasant cordiality those who had parted from him in anguish and tears, or in fury and reproach. But her indifference became to him an hourly increasing torture.

"Why will you always avoid me?" he said to her at last in desperation, finding his opportunity after many days.

"I am not aware that I avoid you," she answered. "I received you constantly in London, and I would have come to your house of Ladysrood had not your party been broken up by death; you are unreasonable, my friend."

"For God's sake, do not banish me to that name!"

"Are you not my friend? Surely you are not my enemy? though perhaps I should be justified if I were yours."

Guilderoy grew white with anger.

"Do not let us fence in this useless fashion. You must know, you must have seen, that I feel to you now wholly as of old. Nay, I feel more—ten thousand times more!"

"What sheer caprice!"

"Not anyway caprice. It is the entire truth. You, who are so fully aware of your power over men, should be the last to be astonished at it."

"I am astonished at no human inconsistencies; but I confess that, said by you to me, these things seem rather like insult than like homage."

"Why?"

"How can you ask me why? You broke off your relations with me with scarcely more consideration than if you had been a *rapin d'atelier* and I a sewing girl, and because regrets assail you now, for the results of your own action, you expect me to be touched by your expressions of them!"

"I did not know my own heart."

"Nay, I think you knew it well enough; you only obeyed all its most frivolous and faithless instincts. Or, rather, the heart said but very little; it was the passions which were in question."

"You are wholly unjust."

She gave a gesture of impatience.

"Men always consider us unjust to them when we fail to deify their weaknesses."

"You are unjust when you doubt that my feeling for you was, and is, the strongest of my life."

"The strongest of *your* life, in which nothing is strong, perhaps," she said with restrained scorn. "Why make to me these vain and useless protestations? You took your own way. It is not my fault if it have led you into paths not pleasant to you."

"If you would only believe in my sincerity and my remorse!"

"Why should I believe in either? You do not

seem to me to know what sincerity or any other deep emotion means. You make love to me and you marry another woman. You tire of that other woman and you imagine that you only love me. It is impossible for any woman to attach much importance to your sentiments or to believe that they can be of any steadfastness or duration."

He was silent; embarrassed by the consciousness of the truth contained in her accusation, and impressed by his impotency to convince her that nevertheless she did him not injustice.

"You have had the only great love of my life," he said, with emotion. "In a moment of ingratitude and blindness I was false to you. I imagined that I could live without you. I have repented my mistake ever since; I have been punished more than you can know or would believe."

She interrupted him with impatience.

"Pray do not put any blame on your wife; I admire her exceedingly. You place her in most painful and difficult positions, and for so young a woman she conducts herself in them with great tact and composure. She is essentially high-bred, and I believe that she deserves a better fate than to go unloved through life; possibly she will not go unloved!"

"For Heaven's sake do not speak of her!"

"Why should I not? She has behaved admirably to me; and, as far as I can judge, admirably to you also. I pity her very sincerely. You are incapable of making any woman happy because you are incapable of being true to any."

"I am true to you! I have always been true to

you, except in one mad, ungrateful moment, which I have repented every year of my life ever since!"

She smiled coldly.

"The truth has had many variations! Do you suppose I have been ignorant of all of your distractions? Your wife may have perhaps, but not I."

He coloured as she spoke.

"They have been mere caprices, mere follies; none have ever touched my heart. That I swear before Heaven!"

"How truly a man's excuse! A man always considers it apology enough for inconstancy if he can declare that his infidelity has been a mere soulless drunkenness of the senses, for which he ought to blush! Other women may see excuse in such a plea; *I* do not."

"I thought you more lenient, more omniscient."

"You thought me more credulous. You forget that you taught me a lesson which the most credulous of women could not forget if she would."

"I made the immense, the irrevocable mistake of putting my heart into my relations with you. The one who does so is always the one who suffers in any relation of that sort. The mistake is rarely mutual."

He felt a sense of powerlessness which was the acutest pain his life had ever known; how, in the face of his abandonment, could he ever persuade her to believe that he had loved, and did now love, her more than any other woman he had ever known?

"We were so happy once!" he said, with a timidity almost boyish.

It seemed to him an insult to her to recall to her

memory joys which had been insufficient to sustain and retain his fidelity.

A profound indignation flushed in the depths of her luminous eyes.

"Spare me that allusion at least!" she said, with scorn and passion.

She rose from her seat and moved onward. But he stopped her.

"Tell me one thing," he said with breathless agitation. "Is it true what they say, that you will accept the hand of the Grand Duke?"

"You have not the smallest figment of title to ask me such a question," she replied with some anger. "You have nothing to do with my life, in any way. I do not, however, mind telling you that my experiences of marriage have not been such as to make me inclined to risk another. What could any man give to me that I have not? And I wholly agree with Balzac that marriage is *la plus grande sottise à laquelle l'humanité est sacrifiée.*" I accepted *your* marriage without reproach. I received and visited your wife. I know nothing more that you could possibly await from me. You have certainly lost all possible title to interrogate me on any subject. You have never seemed to understand that you passed on me the deepest affront that any man can pass on any woman."

"But if you forgave that?"

"Who said that I forgave? Not I. It is your own assumption. I neither chastised nor rebuked it, because to do either would have been beneath me. We leave theatrical scenes to women of the theatres. But

between silence and pardon there are leagues to traverse; I have never passed them. Probably I never shall."

With that she left him and approached a group of acquaintances who were playing a round game of cards in the mid-day sunshine under one of the great pines.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON that same day, Lady Sunbury arrived at Ladysrood, unannounced, bringing her youngest daughter with her; a girl not yet in the world.

"My dear," she said affectionately, "I saw in the papers that my brother has gone out of England; it is unpardonable of him to have left you alone at such a time, so young as you are and the world so unpleasant as it is. I have brought Constance to stay with you, and I will stay myself as long as I can. I suppose Evelyn will not be many weeks away. Where has he gone?"

Gladys answered her with what composure and apparent carelessness she could.

The presence of her sister-in-law was very painful to her. She could not forget that what Hilda Sunbury had told her in the beech-walk on the day of her father's death had brought about the scene with Guilderoy which had separated them more hopelessly than they had ever been separated before.

Lady Sunbury was at this moment moved by the most excellent motives, and actuated by a sense of self-blame which was almost remorse. It would have been

remorse in a character less certain of its own perfections than was hers. She knew that she had pained and distressed John Vernon needlessly in the last hours of his life, and she heard often in memory those farewell words of his, "Be kind to her." She was conscious that she had not been kind to her brother's wife. She knew that she had worried, annoyed, and wounded her many a time, and that in what she had revealed to her concerning the Duchess Sorìa, she had been mainly instrumental in bringing about what her own penetration suspected to be the cause of Guilderoy's sudden departure from England.

She was an admirably conscientious woman, though, like so many conscientious persons, she was wholly ignorant that she was often intensely disagreeable, and even at times very dangerous, from the unwise and irritating things which her conscience impelled her to say and to do.

In coming to Ladysrood she was sincerely desirous to put the ægis of her own presence there, and that of her young daughter, between Gladys and the evil comments of the world. It had been inconvenient to her to leave her own great house of Illington at that moment, and to sacrifice many important social engagements; but she had made the sacrifice with the most admirable intentions, and with that great regard for the reputation of the head of her family which Guilderoy had so often, and so hardly tried. But all the purity and integrity of her intentions could not make her presence otherwise than an intense irritation and oppression to her brother's wife.

All wounded animals long to be alone; and solitude

would have been the only possible balm to the wounds of Gladys, stung to the quick as she was by pain, and missing, as she did every hour of her life, the sense of the near presence of her father's wise and gentle influence. The constant sound of Lady Sunbury's voice, reiterating as it did all maxims of worldly wisdom, and shrewd, cold, common sense, became to her a positive torture which intensified all other suffering in her. The presence even of the young girl, who was impatient of the dulness of Ladysrood, and full of all those artificial and worldly longings which fill the breasts of *débutantes*, was an additional trial to her. Sorrow is bad enough at any time to bear; but its bitterness is tenfold when we cannot shut ourselves up with it in peace, but must at every moment listen to a never-ending stream of commonplace remarks, and affect sympathy with commonplace desires and regrets. The curiosity of Lady Sunbury, moreover, was keen; and without descending absolutely to the coarseness of questioning, she endeavoured, by every indirect means in her power, to discover what had passed between Guilderoy and his wife on the subject of Beatrice Sorìa.

But Gladys told her nothing; and the long, quiet days of the fading summer passed in infinite *ennui* to the guests, and in intolerable weariness of soul to the mistress of Ladysrood. The only peaceful moments which she knew were when she sat alone by the grave of her father on the thyme-grown cliffs above the sea at Christslea.

She felt so utterly alone. Whilst he had lived she had thought herself wretched indeed; but now it seemed to her that no hopeless sorrow could ever have touched

her so long as his noble intelligence and wise affection had been there to shield her from her own passions, and console her for their disappointment.

She had not answered the letter which Guilderoy had left for her on the evening of his departure.

At least she had sent no answer. She had written scores of sheets to him, but had burned them all, dissatisfied with their utter inadequacy to describe her own emotions.

And after all what was there to say? He had married her believing that he would care for her; and he had found himself unable to do so; either from his fault or hers, or neither or both. What matter which? What words could alter that? What reproach could change, or what entreaty could regain, his heart? In truth it had never been hers.

She suffered all the tortures which wring the inmost soul of a woman who loves what has been hers, and knows that all its charm, its senses, its time, its emotions, are given to others, and can never be recalled to her. Men can so easily console themselves for lost passions; even where their hearts ache, their physical pleasures can so easily be gratified by those who do not touch their hearts, that they cannot understand the wholly irreparable loss that the desertion of her lover is to a woman who can only receive happiness through one alone. He can vary his caprices at will; but she, if she loves with all her senses and her soul, believes that she will never find any means to fill up the blank made in her whole life by his abandonment.

To the mind of Lady Sunbury the lot of her sister-in-law still seemed perfectly enviable: a great position,

unlimited command of money, and the power to do whatever she liked unmolested constituted a fate which to Hilda Sunbury, as to the world, appeared one with which it was hypercriticism and ingratitude indeed not to be content. Well regulated minds, like Lady Sunbury's, cannot conceive why any woman requires more than the tranquil monotony of a blameless life, large houses to rule over, and a purse always filled.

To these excellent minds the senses are sins, the passions are follies, and the *besoin d'aimer* is wholly unmentionable. Such gross things are believed in and alluded to by poets, they know; but they think poets mad, and at all events poets are no rule for women who respect themselves.

This opinion, either insinuated or more fully expressed, was the burden of all Lady Sunbury's conversation during her stay at Ladysrood, at all such times as her daughter was not in her presence. She believed, and many virtuous women believe with her, that virtue is like a nail; only hammer at it often enough and long enough and you must end in driving it into any substance whatever.

She knew the world too well not to know all the temptations and dangers which must surround in it such a woman as Gladys when left alone in the midst of its risks and its seductions; and on these she dwelt, and on the duties of all women to resist them she was so persistently eloquent, that she raised in the breast of her hearer a passionate longing to fling duty to the winds, and drove her more nearly from patience and self-control than any injury could have done, made her long as she had never longed for that vengeance of which

she had begun of late to dream. While every fibre of her heart was aching, and every pulse of her existence seemed throbbing with pain, she had to endure as best she could the platitudes and the stiff sonorous phrases with which her guest proclaimed the all-sufficing beauties of virtue and self-esteem.

"If she would but leave me alone!" she thought; but this is just what women of Lady Sunbury's type never do.

The days and the weeks passed, and she heard nothing directly from Guilderoy, although he wrote to his steward. His sister came and went, but she left Lady Constance there always, and the discontent of the girl, impatient of her exile from the gay gatherings of the autumn parties at Illington, mingled with her premature worldliness, and undisguised selfishness, were almost as trying to Gladys in one way as the companionship of the mother in another.

The routine of the tedious days became almost unendurable to her; the monotonous repetition of commonplace observations seemed to her like that torture in which a drop of water was let fall on a prisoner's head every second, until he went mad or died with it.

Lady Sunbury was of too keen an observation not to be well aware of the torment her presence was, but in the cause of duty she never wavered, and she considered it her duty not to leave so young a woman as her brother's wife alone; and she sacrificed herself or her daughter to that conviction with that resolution which made her so trying and so unsympathetic to those whom she benefited.

At such times as Gladys could get away from her,

she passed her hours at Christslea, or shut up in the library writing, and then destroying, hundreds of letters to her husband.

Perhaps if all of them could have been sent to him, and he had had the patience to read them, he would have reached more comprehension of her character than he had ever attained. All her aching, wounded, rebellious heart was uttered in them; knowing no other confidant possible she made a confessor of the reams of paper which she spoiled. But she sent nothing of what she wrote. When read over to herself, they all seemed too tender or too violent, to assert too vehemently or to entreat too piteously.

She had great pride in her, and she could not bring herself to send to him anything which looked like an appeal of the affections. He did not care whether she loved him or not. Why should she tell him that she did?

At times she remembered that he had reproached her with never seeking to win his affections. Was it true that shyness in the first months of her life with him, and pride and jealousy afterwards, had frozen in her warmth which might have won his confidence? She remembered that her father even had charged her with seeming cold.

She was very young still, and she was utterly solitary, and she passed many hours of misery recalling every incident of these past four years, and torturing herself with those vain and cruel wishes which cry out to the past to come back, that we may undo, and unsay, all that has been done and been said in it.

At last she wrote one which satisfied her in so far

as it seemed to her to express her sense of indignity and wrong without descending to appeal.

It was worded thus:

“After what passed between us on the last day that you were here, it is impossible for me to believe, or for you to pretend, that I am in any kind of way necessary to, or desired in, your life. You have told me, in the most undisguised terms, that you regret that I ever had any association with your life whatever. You cannot regret it more than I do. As I ventured to remind you once before, the act was yours, not mine. The only way in which the mistake of it can be in any measure rectified, is for me to leave you. The little fortune which was left to my father on the day of his death is mine, and is more than enough for all my wants. I only await your permission, which I cannot believe will be refused, to leave Ladysrood, and seek some solitude, where under my maiden name I may endeavour to forget that I ever had the misfortune to become your wife.”

She read this again and again, scanning it carefully and critically, to make sure that it contained no word which could flatter him, or imply in her any infirmity of purpose, or yearning of affection. Her future was wholly obscure to her; she did not dare to drag consideration of it into the clear light of reason and actuality. All she felt was a violent longing to cease to be his wife in name, since she had never been so in heart, and to eat his bread, and rule his house, and spend his gold no more. Other women might be content with that purely conventional position; she was

not: he had made life intolerable to her; let the whole world know that he had done so.

She was no mere meek blind puppet to gratify him by appearing at his side at Court, and bearing children to his name, whilst all the joys and interests and passions of his life were found elsewhere. No doubt he would prefer that she should be one of those patient, passionless, sightless women who would go through all the ceremonies of society beside him, and leave him free, without the world's censure, to find pleasure and sentiment in the arms of others. But she was not one of those—and all that even her father had asked of her was to forbear from avenging desertion by dishonour.

She read the letter again and again, and could find no flaw in it. It asserted only what it was her perfect right to claim.

He could not compel her to stay on in his houses, only that by her presence there he might have more facility for inviting under his roof all those on whom his caprice fastened for the hour.

She signed it "Gladys Vernon" and sealed the envelope of it with her father's arms.

Then a remembrance came to her of such humiliation, that her white cheeks grew red with the shame of it, where she sat in solitude. She did not know where to address him; she would have to inquire of his land-agent where he was.

As she passed, looking at the undirected envelope, meditating whether, to avoid such confession of ignorance, she should address it to the English Embassy in

Paris, and let it take its chance, the groom of the chambers entered the library.

"Lord Aubrey has arrived, my lady," said the man, "and asks if you will receive him."

CHAPTER IX.

"My dear Gladys, I had no time to let you know," said Aubrey a moment after, "for I was uncertain myself until last night that I should be able to accept the invitation of your county to their banquet. I have only two hours to spend with you; but that is better than nothing. You look ill, dear. But that is natural. So irreparable a calamity as yours cannot be borne without suffering, which is in itself an illness."

She was glad to see him; the frank warm sympathy of his words, the grasp of his hands, the sense of his kindly and staunch sincerity were always precious to her. After the platitudes of Hilda Sunbury, they seemed like a fresh sea-wind after the dull close air of some shut chamber. Yet a certain uneasiness which she had never felt before made her constrained and troubled under the searching and earnest gaze of his eyes. She knew that she had done what he would blame; she knew that she had written what he would blame still more.

"It must be a consolation to you to be absorbed in public life?" she said wistfully.

"It takes one out of oneself," he replied. "All work does so; but national work most of all."

"You have so much to think of," she said evasively, "you could not be unhappy."

Aubrey was silent.

"I have nothing to think of," she added, "except my father."

"Ah, dear! What did I tell you? There is no irremediable sorrow except death."

They were alone in the gardens into which they had strolled. Lady Sunbury was away for a few days, the girl had gone out riding on the moors; there had been rain in the morning, but the early afternoon was fine though sunless. There was the warm glow of autumnal flowers everywhere.

"Why is Evelyn away?" he asked. "Have you done that which I besought you not to do? I hoped to find you drawn nearer to him. He was sincerely afflicted at the loss you sustained."

"Yes. He was fond of my father."

Her voice trembled; the tears rose to her eyes.

"Well, surely that common sorrow should have united you?"

"He does not even write to me!" she said with indignation. "He only writes to Ward and Brunton."

They were his land-agent and his house-steward.

"He probably does not know what to say to you," replied Aubrey. "When men are in false positions they generally avoid writing. We are all moral cowards, I assure you. He is not more so than the rest of us. We dislike to give pain, and our dislike to doing so usually brings about more pain in the end than if we had frankly grasped the truth at the first."

"He is your cousin; it is natural that you should take his part."

"I have not deserved that rebuke from you, Gladys."

There was the scent of wet grass and fallen leaves, and the sound of the fountains came through the perfect silence, monotonous and melodious.

"Did you ever lose any one you loved greatly?" she asked him.

"Yes," he replied. "I lost one whom I loved immensely; yet for whose loss I was thankful, since her life would have been a greater torture to me than her death was."

"That must have been terrible?"

"There is nothing so terrible."

She did not ask more. She was absorbed in that selfishness which is begotten in the most generous natures by the suffering of the affections. She could not rouse herself from it to enter into the life of another. Aubrey saw that her thoughts were not with him, and the impulse of confidence which had momentarily moved him was checked.

"Did you know that he loved the Duchess Soria?" she asked abruptly. The question troubled and embarrassed her companion; he answered with hesitation:

"Who could be infamous enough to tell you that? It was before his marriage."

"It might be before. But he loves her still now; he has never really loved any other woman; he has told me so."

"A *boutade*," said Aubrey angrily. "One of his innumerable *boutades*. He is like Horace's wayward child:

Porrigit irato puero quum poma; recusat:
Sume, catelle; negat: si non des; optat. . . .”

“That is why he adores her; she is withdrawn from him. I have never found the fruit that he would court, given or withdrawn,” said Gladys bitterly.

She was thinking of her husband’s easy acquiescence in her own withdrawal from him.

“Pardon me, dear,” said Aubrey tenderly; “but I think you have never endeavoured to understand his character enough to soothe or influence him. You have loved him no doubt; but you have given to your love that *âpre* and exacting complexion which alienates any man, and, most of all, a man as self-indulgent and as universally caressed as he. Forgive me if I seem to blame you. I know he has made life difficult for you.”

“Will you read what I have written to him?”

She took a letter from her pocket, and held it out to him.

“I have written many others and destroyed them. They seemed too insolent. Read this!”

It was the letter which she had written that morning.

Aubrey sat down on a bench under one of the cedars, and read it. She could tell nothing from the expression of his countenance. He folded it up, and gave it back to her.

“If your father were living he would not let you send it.”

She coloured; she knew that already.

“To send it will be to sever your life forever from Guilderoy’s. Anger is a bad counsellor. You will live on the excitation of anger for a few months; it is like a drug; it supplies all the natural forces of life for a

time only to leave them utterly prostrate when its effects have passed. You are just now in that state of intense pain and violent indignation in which a woman has before now murdered the man who loved and wronged her. But when the heat and wrath of this hour pass, as they will pass, you will regret it to the last day of your life if, of your own will and accord, you break the bonds of your affections, and make it utterly impossible for them ever to be re-united."

She was silent. She was seated beside him on the bench. Her head was turned away, but he could see her emotion in the strong throbbing of the vein of her throat.

"You write and you speak," continued Aubrey, "as if he had left you forever; he has intimated no intention whatever of doing so; he has gone away for a few weeks as he has often done before, and you have then thought nothing of it. When he returns, receive him as usual. Be sure that he will appreciate your forbearance and your kindness. Men often seem ungrateful, but I do not think they are often so for real tenderness."

"Receive him when he comes from her!"

"From 'her' or any other 'her.' Why do you take for granted that he is now the lover of the Duchess Sorla? Myself, I do not believe that he is. She is a very proud woman, and his rupture with her was public and sudden; the kind of offence which a proud woman never forgives; for she had done nothing to bring it about or to merit it."

"And I am to be grateful if she now refuses his homage!"

"You are perverse, my dear," said Aubrey, sadly. "I do not tell you to be grateful; I tell you to be generous. They are very different things. And at the risk of wounding you, Gladys, I must confess that what you feel now is much more irritated self-love, than it is love at all."

She rose impetuously, and walked with quick, uneven steps to and fro upon the grass; her sombre dress enhanced the fairness of her face, the golden glow of her hair, the darkness of her eyes and lashes, as the full light poured down on her through the branches of the trees. She did not look a woman to share the fate of Ariadne. Aubrey looked at her and his vision was troubled, and his calm wisdom and unselfishness were disturbed in their balance. Did his cousin deserve that he should plead thus for him? Did the wanderer, who shunned no Ogygia wherein white arms beckoned to him, merit so much fidelity, so much forbearance?

And yet she loved him. What hope was there for her except in such patience and such pardon as might in time bring her reward?

"May I tear the letter up?" he asked her.

"If you wish," she said, reluctantly.

"And will you promise me not to write any other like it?"

"I cannot promise that."

"And yet, dear, I ask the promise more for your sake than his. If you leave him you can wound his pride certainly, and humble him before the world; but that will be all, for he will seek and find consolation. But if you, of your own act, sever the tie which unites

you, you will be for ever miserable, for you will never forgive yourself."

She was silent; her eyes watched the shadows of the leaves swaying upon the grass; she was unconvinced, angered, mortified, almost sullen. It seemed to her that her wrongs were wide as the universe, and no one pitied them.

At that moment Lady Constance ran down the terrace steps coming from her ride; she was calling uproariously to the dogs who had been with her; she brought a boisterous rush of youthful energy and spirits: Gladys felt very old beside her.

They were no more alone, and in half-an-hour he had to take leave of her, for his presence was expected that evening at a political banquet in the county town some fifty miles away.

"Promise me, for your father's sake," he murmured as he bade her adieu.

She sighed, and her mouth trembled, but she did not promise. She looked at the fragments of the torn letter lying on the ground: she knew every phrase of it by heart; she could write it again in ten minutes.

After he had left her she walked to and fro restlessly and wearily in the grey, soft, autumnal afternoon. The silence was unbroken except now and then by the caw of a rook; the great façade of the house stretched before her, stately and noble, with the greatness on it of a perished time; the solemn stillness of the woods and moors enveloped it; there was that in its very beauty and majesty which hurt her more than any unloveliness would have done. She remembered the day when she had come thither first, with all a child's eager

curiosity, a child's ardent imagination. It was not so very long ago in years; and yet how old she felt!

What was he doing now?

That was the thought which tortured her every hour of the day and night. In absence and uncertainty, distance seems to grow up like the wall of a great prison between us and the one whose face we cannot see, whose voice we cannot hear, and whose time and whose thoughts are given we know not where, only are not, we do know, given to us.

She was jealous of other women—of any woman, of all women—with a passionate physical jealousy which was intolerable pain and as intolerable an humiliation. He had thought her cold because the first few weeks of his early love for her had left with her such ineffable, such undying, remembrance, that the mere caresses of habit were unendurable to her after them. She knew all that ecstasy, ardour, and the might of a master passion, could give; and she had been utterly unable to resign herself to the mere occasional formality of a joyless embrace. With all the intensity of life in her which youth, and strength and perfect health could give to her, she had been utterly unable to endure that passionless position of the mere possible mother of his children, to which he had relegated her. It was because such warmth and force of passion were in her that she had seemed passionless to him, because she had refused to take from habit what love denied to her. And now all that passion in her felt was the most cruel, the most torturing, of all pain; the pain of a totally impotent jealousy; a jealousy which hides itself from public eyes, from pride, but makes wretched

every single thought of the brain and impulse of the heart, robs night of sleep, and renders daylight hateful.

Men are intolerant of the jealousy of women, but they might be more indulgent to it than they are if they remembered its excuse. Stendahl has justly said that the pain of jealousy is so intolerable to a woman because it is so wholly impossible for her to follow in absence the life of the man she loves, so wholly impossible for her to measure his sincerity, or to be sure of his truth in any way. The man can watch the woman, can test her in a thousand ways, can haunt her steps and prove her fidelity; but she can do nothing of this in return. If he chose to lie to her she must be deceived; and the more loyal, the more delicate, the more generous her nature, the more are all means of learning the truth of his words and the facts of his actions forbidden to her.

“*Toujours les délicats souffrent!*” And this is as true of love as of life.

CHAPTER X.

THE afternoon was growing dark, and the low red sun was glowing behind dark clouds as she turned to ascend the terrace steps.

The young Constance was sitting disconsolately all alone with the dogs about her.

“I am afraid you are very dull here,” said Gladys, as she saw the girl’s attitude.

“It is as dull as death!” said the girl pettishly.

Gladys' face changed, and the look of momentary sympathy passed out of it.

"I will beg your mother to let you go home," she answered. "It is very painful to me to feel you are here against your will, and I shall do perfectly well alone."

"Why do you not go abroad?" asked the girl. "You might enjoy yourself endlessly. Oh, I know you are in mourning just now; but it was just the same when you were not. You never enjoyed anything."

"Perhaps not," said Gladys, thinking of the days when she had enjoyed every hour of her existence, on the moors and by the sea, when to feel her boat bound with the tide, and hear the lark sing above the gaze, and watch a nest of young chaffinches in the orchard boughs, or the play of young rabbits on the moorland turf, had been happiness enough for her—such simple natural country-born happiness as this girl had never known.

"He is enjoying himself; why should not you? Nobody wears deep mourning long now, and nobody makes any difference for it while they do," said Lady Constance, holding up one of the newspapers which lay in her lap, and pointing with her finger to a paragraph in one of them.

Gladys looked involuntarily where she pointed. It was a description of an autumnal party then assembled at one of the great châteaux of France; and amongst the names of the guests were printed those of Guilderoy and the Duchess Sorla.

"Always those journals!" said Gladys, as she motioned it aside in disgust.

"They are very indiscreet, sometimes," said the girl cruelly, with a malicious smile.

Gladys said nothing, but passed by her tormentor and went indoors.

"What a fool she is to care!" thought Lady Constance.

In the morning very early a mounted messenger brought a letter from Aubrey, which he had written over night before leaving the town.

"It is impossible for me to see you yet again, my dear Gladys," he wrote, "though I will endeavour to do so next month. Meanwhile I once more entreat you to do nothing rashly. The only possible consolation for us in sorrow is when we are able to feel that we have done nothing to deserve or hasten it. Perfect patience with those we love gives us this solace if it gives us no other. Very likely your wrongs are less grave than you think; but even if they are so, still do nothing rashly.

"You have a high sense of honour, and having this you must feel that as you accepted the charge of your husband's good name you must, in honour, do nothing to imperil it. And forgive me, dear, if I add that in all your expressions, whether written or spoken, I found much more of the evidence of a sense of injury than I found of the unselfishness which is the highest note of love.

"I am a man, as you know, in whose harassed and busied life neither poetry nor love has any place, but I remember reading, I forget where or how, some lines which have haunted my memory ever since. They are these:

Though you forget,
No word of mine shall mar your pleasure.
Though you forget.
You fill'd my barren life with treasure;
You may withdraw the gift you gave,
You still are queen, I still am slave,
Though you forget.

"Now it is the heart which says as much as this, even when forsaken, which to my thinking loves; and no heart which says less than this does love. It may throb with rage, fret with jealousy, smart with pain, but it does not love. What, after all, dear, is any human life that it should exact as its right remembrance from another?

"Whether we have that right or not, we are only either wise or tender when we waive it wholly, and are content to give our devotion without seeking or asking for any recompense whatever. If you give such feeling as this to Evelyn now, some day or other be sure that you will have your reward.

"Whether he deserves it or not is wholly beside the question. It is our own life, our own character, which should determine the measure and standard of what we give—not those of the person to whom we give it.

"Pardon me this homily, dear, which I write when I am very fatigued, at long after midnight. I endeavour to say to you what I believe your father would say to you if he were now living. Who knows that he may not stand behind me as I write this, though my gross senses cannot perceive his presence? We know little of life, nothing whatever of death. All things are pos-

sible. The only thing which always seems to me utterly impossible is that a great mind can ever die.

“I am affectionately yours,
“FRANCIS.”

CHAPTER XI.

THE essay on Friendship which Aubrey had read one year before, chanced to catch his eye where it lay on one of the library tables at Balfrons a few weeks after he had left Ladysrood; and the sight of it suggested to him a course which would have its drawbacks and its dangers, but which offered to him some chance of being of service to a life which was constantly growing more dear to him, but which, as it did so, awakened all that self-denial which was the strongest quality in his nature.

“If I love thee what is that to thee?” he mused. “Or to any one?”

It would be for ever a secret locked in his own breast, for his self-control was a force which had never yet failed him.

It was difficult for him to leave England at that moment, for he was in office, and the drudgery of high place seldom relaxes much even in the months of comparative liberty. But it was possible to get away for a few days without awaking too much comment in that Argus-eyed public which is for ever seeing what does not exist, and the week after he had been at Ladysrood found him in Paris. There he learned that his cousin

had ended his visits to French châteaux and had gone to his own palace in Venice. Although, as a rule, he condemned all interference of the kind, and did not even now expect much from it, it still seemed to him that some one should endeavour to recall Guilderoy to his duties, and he saw no one who could do so with any possibility of success unless it were himself. After long and anxious reflection he decided to attempt it.

When he reached Venice, the November day was full of warm and limpid sunshine sparkling on green water, shining marbles, and ruddy canvas. It was towards evening, and Guilderoy was at home; he received his cousin with cordiality, which was more apparent than real, for he felt an uneasy consciousness that Aubrey had not come thither without some especial reason, and some apprehension of its nature moved him.

Aubrey stated, indeed, that he was only there for a few hours and was going to Vienna by way of Udine.

"I am leaving myself very soon," said Guilderoy. "I am going southward or I would accompany you."

"Southward?" said Aubrey, and looked him full in the face.

"Yes," replied the other in the tone of a man who is prepared to resent any comment on his statement, and resist any interrogation.

"Not homeward?" asked Aubrey.

"Not at present."

Aubrey made no further remark, and they dined together, conversing on the political situation in England, and other topics of the hour. After dinner they sat on the balcony which overhung the water above the

Rialto bridge; the night was cold but the skies were brilliant with innumerable stars, and a full moon, golden and glorious, shone down on Venice.

"Which is life?" thought Aubrey: "to dream here under the stars in all this amorous stillness, or to have every hour of the day filled as mine is with the pressure of public business and the conflict of men's tongues?"

But he did not say this; he said instead:

"You have never asked me if I have seen your wife."

"I am sure that you have, without asking," said Guilderoy, almost insolently, for he was extremely angered at what he foresaw that he was about to hear. Aubrey passed over the tone and the words.

"I was reading again your essay on Friendship, at Balfrons the other day," he said instead. "It is very clever and entirely true. But one thing seemed to me very odd as I read it."

"That I should have written it at all, I should think," said Guilderoy.

"No; but that all your admirable remarks lead to so little observance of your own rules in your own relationships. One cannot but see that with your wife——"

"What of my wife?" said Guilderoy very angrily. "She is perpetually making me scenes of upbraiding. I cannot live in them."

"But you do not even write to her?"

"I do not write, because she offended me very gravely."

"Did she offend you without warrant?"

"I do not say that, but she began reproaches which

would be interminable if one stayed to hear them. She must have complained of me to you, or what would you know?"

"Be thankful if she complain to no one but me, my dear Evelyn. And complaint is not the correct word. I asked about you of course, and she confessed that you had left her in anger and that you did not write to her—and that she could only hear where you were through Brunton or Ward."

Guilderoy was silent.

"Well," said Aubrey, with some hesitation, "do you consider that you render her happy?"

"I do not admit that any person has the right to ask me such a question," he said with increasing anger.

"I told you I had left my good manners outside the door, as one leaves one's slippers in Persia," said Aubrey. "As I have intruded so far without them, I will come a step farther. I am conscious of my rashness, but we were children together, and I will risk offending you. Do you consider that you have done what you could have done to keep the promises you made to John Vernon?"

Guilderoy moved impatiently. "What did Vernon ever tell you?"

"He never told me anything. But I am quite sure that you must have promised him infinite consideration for his daughter, or he would never have given her to you. He was not a man to care for rank and fortune."

"And what would you imply?" asked Guilderoy with great hauteur.

"It is not my habit to imply," said Aubrey coldly. "I always say what I mean; and say it as clearly as I can. I mean and I say now, that Vernon would never

have given you his daughter if he had foreseen that you would be as inconstant to her as you are."

"I do not consider," said Guilderoy, with great difficulty controlling his anger, "that even our relationship warrants you in such intrusion on my private affairs."

"Oh, I have said I have left good manners outside the door for the moment," said Aubrey indifferently. "There come times in life when one must choose between being discourteous, or being cowardly, and in that dilemma I always choose the former as the lesser fault. I must venture to remind you, if you have forgotten it, that to leave so young a woman as Gladys all alone is to expose her to a thousand perils."

Guilderoy reddened slightly, partly with anger, partly with the consciousness that his cousin was right.

"She is very cold, and she is very proud," he said impatiently. "Such women are their own protectors."

"A convenient theory, but not a true one: *Nil Helena peccat* may be fairly said of any woman who is left alone."

"Are you inclined to act the part of Paris?" said Guilderoy with considerable scorn and insolence, which his cousin forced himself not to resent.

"I am as much like Paris as you are like Menelaus," he said with admirable good temper. "But you must be aware, whether you choose to admit it or not, that you invite misfortune when you virtually abandon so young and so lovely a woman as your wife."

"I do not abandon her in any sense of the word," said Guilderoy. "She has everything that my position, my respect, my fortune, can bestow on her. I shall

never cease to testify to her every possible outward regard. I detest the very smallest exhibition to the world of disunion."

"But you see nothing injurious in the actual existence of it! My dear Guilderoy, can you seriously think that a mere girl like Gladys, always at heart in love with you and not cold (though you imagine her so because you are yourself cold to her), can be expected to be content with nothing more than the conventional pretence of union? Surely, with your vast experience of the sex, you must know them better than that."

"I cannot help it! She is not sympathetic to me; it is a calamity, not a crime!"

"No woman whom you had married would have been sympathetic to you for more than three months," thought Aubrey, but he did not say so aloud.

"Have you come here to read me a homily?" continued Guilderoy with impatience and hauteur.

Aubrey looked at him steadfastly.

"That is beyond my pretensions. I am not your keeper. But I frankly admit that I came here to tell you one thing. I was at Ladysrood for two hours. I found your wife in that state of irritation, suffering, and offence, in which a woman may easily fall at a bound from perfect virtue to utter ruin and self-abandonment. She is young; she does not inherit her father's philosophy; she is profoundly unhappy, and I thought that it was only right that you should be made aware of it, for you seem to think that a woman is like one of your Lelys or Reynolds which hang immovable in your family portrait gallery, though you may only glance at them once in twenty years. My dear Evelyn, you have been

the lover of innumerable women; recall all your experiences of the wives of other men; does not all your knowledge tell you that your own wife is now in a position of the greatest peril which a sense of utter loneliness, and the *besoin d'aimer* ungratified, can create for any one at her dangerous age?"

Guilderoy did not reply; he rose and walked up and down the long balcony with impatience and uneasiness. His intelligence and his conscience both made it impossible for him to deny the force of his cousin's suggestions; and his mind, which was always open to reason even when his passions obscured it, could not but acknowledge the truth of them. A sudden suspicion also flashed across his thoughts.

"You do not mean—" he said abruptly. "You do not mean that there is any one——"

"There is no one yet, certainly," replied Aubrey. "But how long it may be before that supreme temptation comes to her—who can say? When it does come you cannot blame her. She can with justice say to you, *vous l'avez voulu*. I remind you again: *Nil Helena peccat*."

Guilderoy was silent.

"I cannot help it," he said at last, uneasily. "I do not care for her. One cannot feign that feeling."

"But why in heaven's name did you marry her?"

"I thought I cared. I did care a little while. How can one account for these emotions? My dear Francis, whatever faults I may have, I am never consciously insincere. If I seem to deceive women it is because I deceive myself."

"That I entirely believe. But it is the more hope-

less for them. Nor can I sympathise with you in any way. You might have made of her anything you chose if you had taken the trouble."

Guilderoy was silent.

He was thinking of the days when in the cottage porch at Christslea he had quoted to John Vernon the *et puer est, et nudus Amor*. And how wholly it had been with him as the dead man had predicted!

"He knew me better than I knew myself," he thought. "And yet I was quite honest in what I said then, and in what I urged."

"Yes," said Aubrey, divining the course of his reflections; "I believe you are always entirely sincere, though very few people would believe it. But the effect of your changes of feeling is quite as disastrous to others as if you were not. I think your estimate of Gladys is wholly incorrect. I think she would even interest you and attract you if you deigned to occupy yourself with her character. I think she is a woman who would be capable even of making you passionately in love with her, if she had not the irreparable fault of belonging to you. But I have said all that I can possibly claim the right to say—perhaps even more than I ought to have said. I hope, however, that you will pardon me, and think over what I have suggested. I believe that you would never forgive yourself if, through your neglect, any dishonour came upon your home, or even any very great wrong were done to the memory of a dead man who trusted you."

Then Aubrey rose, bade him good-night, and quitted him.

"Will it have done any good?" thought Aubrey

doubtfully. "At all events, I have done what little I could do for her."

His own heart was heavy, for his self-imposed mission had not been accomplished without much pain to himself. Far more willingly, had it been possible to do so, would he have struck the man who could be faithless to her; far more willingly would he have espoused her quarrel with the old rude weapons of violence; but to him they were forbidden by his sense of dignity and duty, of position and of patriotism; and even if they had not been so, they would have been of no earthly service to her. He had little hope that anything would be of service. In endeavouring to influence his cousin he felt like a man who tries to make a solid dyke out of the shifting sand. Sometimes the dyke is made, but the sea is always there.

He left his cousin the tormented prey of many conflicting emotions, of which the dominant one was self-reproach, although almost as strong a one was anger.

Amidst his self-reproach there was a strong sense of anger against Aubrey, who had presumed to interfere with him, and there was also a vague jealousy. What title had his cousin to espouse the cause of Gladys? What right had he to make himself the confidant of her sorrows, or the champion of her wrongs? Her father might have said all this, and would have had the right to say it; but he did not concede to Aubrey any more right to do so than he would have allowed to any one of the gondoliers then idling at his water-gate.

A great irritation rose up in him at the thought of another man being the consoler and adviser of his wife;

and he remembered how constantly Aubrey had found time to visit at Ladysrood in spring or in autumn, and to sit with Gladys in her boudoir in the London house, even in the pressure and hurry of a crowded London season. He had been glad of it at the time; he had even constantly thanked his cousin for so much devotion to her interests; but now this intimacy wore to his eyes a less agreeable and innocent aspect. Not that he suspected for a moment Aubrey of any disloyal intent. Aubrey's visit to himself proved his loyalty, and testified to his candour; but the idea of his influence on Gladys and of his defence of her was, to him, exceedingly distasteful.

"If he were married, should I ever presume to take him to task about his wife?" he thought with strong displeasure. The substance of what Aubrey had said might be correct enough; it was the fact that he did say it at all which constituted his offence.

Nevertheless the counsels, neither of his friend nor of his conscience, were of weight enough to turn his steps northwards. He left Venice within a few days and passed on to Naples.

CHAPTER XII.

GLADYS did not send the letter she had written, but neither did she comprehend the greatness of the love which Aubrey called on her to give. It was such love as her father had counselled her to attain and striven to inspire in her; love which rises above all memories of self, and pardons all offences against it as God, in

the dreams of mortals, pardons theirs. But her years were too few, her heart was too sore, her jealousy was too intense, her passions had been too early excited, only to be left in solitude and oblivion, for her to be able to reach even in mere comprehension the height to which Aubrey pointed.

The days and the weeks passed on, and winter came earlier to Ladysrood than it came to the land where Guilderoy still found the earth green and the skies and the seas smiling. Always beautiful in all seasons, yet the great house was austere and melancholy towards the close of the year in the short dark days and in the long silent nights. Its immense woods were leafless, its gardens were cold and swept by bitter winds blowing from the high moors beyond; on still days or nights, when the sea was stormy, the sound of its breakers roaring on the rocks three miles away was audible and dreary as the very groan of Nature herself.

The young Lady Constance grew indignant and rebellious beyond her power to conceal.

"If you would only go to Illington or Balfrons!" she said fifty times a week; and one day she added insolently, "Why should I stay here to please you and my mother? What are either of you afraid of? This place is like a nunnery, like a prison. It is charming enough in summer or autumn when it is full of people, but now it would drive a saint to madness. Have you any lover that they are afraid should come to you? Trust me if you have and I will help you. If you tell me nothing I will elope with one of the grooms. It will be life at any rate, and it will make my mother sorry she ever sent me here."

Gladys did not reply, but a few hours after she said to the girl, "I am going to London to-morrow. I will take you to Illington as I pass through your county."

The girl embraced her, and was beside herself with joy. But she could not resist a covert impertinence:

"Aubrey is in London!" she said with a rude smile.

"I suppose he is, since there is to be a winter session," replied her hostess. "I shall not stay in London. I am going straight to Paris."

"I wish you would take me with you," said Lady Constance, repenting that she had not made herself more agreeable, and hastily computing the toilettes, *étrennes*, and pretty things in general which she might have "got out" of the mistress of Ladysrood if she had concealed her own *ennui* and acquired influence.

"I am very sorry, but I cannot do that for you," said Gladys. "I will take you home, where you have so much desired to be. That is all I can do."

She was in that mood in which a woman will rush on to her own torture or her own destruction, and would not stay though a host of angels and archangels stood in her way to turn her back from her self-chosen path.

She drove rapidly through London from one station to another; at the latter she was, to her surprise, met on the platform by Aubrey. He had received a telegram from Illington announcing her departure, and Lady Sunbury had had only time to add, "Prevent her leaving England at all hazards!"

The express was on the point of departure; he had no time to say a word; he entered the carriage with her.

"I must speak to you," he said hurriedly. "I can get back to the House by eleven o'clock."

She did not reply; she was annoyed and offended. She resented this treatment of her as of some imprudent child whom all his family considered they had a right to control.

Aubrey looked tired and unwell.

Times in England were troubled, and political life stormy and thankless. He did not relax his energies; but a weary sense grew on him more strongly every year that the combat was useless, and that, although still veiled under Parliamentary formulæ and constitutional fictions, the country was practically abandoned to mob-rule.

And he looked at the woman whom he admitted to his own thoughts that he loved, and he felt that he was powerless either to touch her heart or to save her from misery.

She was very pale; even her lips were pale, and her blue eyes looked almost black, whilst the dark furs of her travelling hood and of her long cloak enhanced the whiteness of her complexion and the brightness of her hair. She sat opposite to him in silence; she was deeply resentful of his presence there, and she did not aid him by a single sentence.

"You are going to join Guilderoy?" he asked abruptly at length.

"Have I no right to do so?" she asked coldly.

Aubrey gave a gesture of impatience.

"When women speak of their rights their joys are gone," he thought, and answered aloud: "No one could dispute your right, my dear. But it is not always wise

to use our right. That I have said to you often before now."

She was still silent.

"You had my letter the day I left you at Ladysrood?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And it made no impression on you?"

"It was very noble, no doubt. But you are not in my place. You cannot judge."

"Can *you* judge clearly, do you think? How much do you see that is true, and how much distorted? How much that is wise, and how much unwise? Feeling is a dangerous guide. It leads us into fatal errors."

"I have resisted mine long enough."

"And you are tired of resistance. That I can understand. But if you are wise, my dear, and unselfish, you will continue to resist. What good can it do for you to see him in your present state of violent irritation?"

"I wish to know the truth."

"I would rather," she added more passionately, "know any truth—the worst truth—than live like a child, like an animal, like a plant, told nothing, hearing nothing, unconsidered and disregarded, as month after month goes on. If I am not dear to him, I am a burden to him: there can be no medium between the two. Let him say so to me honestly, and I will trouble him no more."

"What would you do?"

"I can live very well on what my father left me."

"You mean that you will separate yourself from Guilderoy?"

"Will you tell me why I should not?"

"There are a thousand reasons. Chief of all there is the supreme reason that you belong to him, and that you care immensely for him, though you now only listen to your anger."

Her face flushed.

"It is an insult to say that to me."

"My dear child, I do not insult any one. It is not my habit. It is the highest honour to her that a woman should remain faithful *quand même*. You seem to me to be ashamed of what is really the finest quality in your character. Youth has often that sort of *mauvaise honte* before its best emotions."

"You admire Griseldis as my father did!"

"I do not ask you to be Griseldis. You are not beaten, outraged, or robbed of your children; that which you have to complain of you would probably have been spared if you had endeavoured to be more indulgent and to pass over what would never have been thrust on you if you had not looked for it."

The train rushed on through the heavy grey darkness; the lamp swung above their heads, and its yellow light shone on her face on which a great anger gathered.

"I know you only care for his reputation because he is a branch of your own great house," she said coldly. "It is no doubt natural you should feel so. It is perhaps as natural that I should feel otherwise."

"That is untrue and unjust," said Aubrey, with the only sternness she had ever heard from him. "I have been always your friend, often at great cost to myself, and I have more than once run all risks of rupture with

my cousin for your sake in the endeavour to persuade him to give you greater happiness, and greater consideration. I say nothing more to you than your own father said, who of course cared alone for you and nothing for my cousin. I endeavour to dissuade you from your journey now, because I know that to follow Guilderoy will only appear to him espionage, surveillance, interference, curiosity, everything which is most irritating to the pride and to the liberty of man. He left you in irritation: when his irritation is passed he will return to you, if you do not of your own accord raise some insurmountable obstacle."

She did not reply; her eyes gazed sombrely through the glass at the darkness of the night and the reflections of the lamp.

"I entreat you," he continued, "not to leave England. In England you are with all of us; you are safe in reputation and in circumstance. Ladysrood is too lonely for so young a woman as you are, but my sister will be beyond expression glad if you will stay with her indefinitely, wherever she be. She said so to me only this morning."

"She is very good, but I shall not trouble her."

"This is the sheer madness of obstinacy. What will you accomplish by following my cousin? He will not pardon it if you follow and arraign him. What good can it possibly do? What use is the mere momentary indulgence of anger when it must inevitably be followed by a lifetime of regret. The greatest evil of all such upbraidings as you will make to him, if you see him in your present state of irritated pain, is that in them every one says so much more than they wish

or mean, wild and bitter words are exchanged which can never be forgotten, even if they are ever pardoned; and that which might have been a mere passing sorrow, a temporary estrangement, is deepened and widened into a life-long enmity. I have said to you, before, all that it is possible to say. I only entreat you now to be guided by it, and remain in England."

Her heart was hardened against her best friend. Like almost every woman she was only capable of believing that those alone loved her who wholly agreed with her and, without reserve, sympathised in all her emotions. She had even doubted her father's affection for her, because it had been critical and temperate in judgment. Her heart now was sore, hurt, apprehensive, full of anger and yet unbearable indignation; she would have liked her companion to give her limitless, unquestioning consolation and indignation likewise. She longed to weep her heart out on the breast of a friend; to cry out against fate, and love, and earth, and heaven, and all the cruel treacheries of human life, and hear some voice full of compassion echo all her own cries. But Aubrey seemed to her only to rebuke her; only to palliate all she suffered from, only to study the interests of his family, and the conventionalities of the world.

It closed her heart to him. She was too full of pain and anger both to penetrate his motives or even for an instant to dream of his self-denials.

He was powerless to persuade or to control her. All the influence which he had possessed upon her before was lost in the flood of blind and passionate impulses let loose in her by the pain of jealousy. She knew well enough that he was right; but she would not

open her ears to his counsels or her heart to his kindness.

If he had been less loyal to his cousin, he might have been more successful in his persuasions. If he had conjured her by his own affection he might have prevailed on her to return. But no syllable which could have been even influenced by personal desires escaped him. John Vernon risen from his grave could not have spoken with more absolute self-denial than he did. And he gained no influence, he made no impression; jealousy and indignation, and the bitter sense of ignorance and wrong, were all hardening her heart and driving her on in strong self-will, regardless of the issue of the fate which she provoked.

Every argument which he could use, every inducement, conjuration, and even prayer which he could call to his aid he exhausted in vain. She knew that her husband and the woman whom he had told her he loved more than any other creature upon earth, were somewhere in Italy together. England in its dark and early winter seemed to her only like that ice-prison which holds the bodies of the damned in the verse of Dante.

Wearied, pained and mortified, Aubrey at last desisted from his endeavours and remained silent as the train flew through the country silences onwards towards Dover.

"I am not my cousin's keeper," he thought bitterly. "And very likely if he knew what I am doing now he would only misconstrue my reasons, and rebuke me for meddlesome interference!"

There was no sound but that of the oscillations of

the train swinging at headlong speed over its iron sleepers.

Neither spoke again till the journey was almost done.

"You will not warn him that I am going away?" she said suddenly once.

"I am not an informer, as I told you once before," he answered coldly. "But his sister will no doubt find some way to let him know that you have left England."

"It does not matter," she replied as coldly; and, she thought, wretchedly, "he never changes or pauses in his wishes for me!"

The silence remained unbroken until the slackening of the speed of the train told them that they were near the docks of Dover. Then Aubrey stooped a little forward, and resting his grey eyes upon her sadly, said with great gentleness, yet with a coldness which she had never heard from him:

"If you have any true confidence in my judgment and in my affection for you, listen to me now. Return here and wait until Guilderoy comes to you of his own accord. If you have patience that time will not be long."

She heard the wise words with the impatience of a woman who knows beforehand what advice she is about to receive, and has beforehand decided to follow none of it. Aubrey seemed to her cold, unsympathetic, conventional; she wanted his grief and indignation as her support, she was almost unjust enough to say to herself that the clannish feeling of family dignity made him think more of preserving his cousin's name from public comment, than of her own personal pain. She was in

that state when every form of consolation or counsel seems an irritant or a mockery; when, as Horace has it, anger being unbridled becomes the violent tyrant of the soul.

"I have a right to know. I have a right to know," she repeated to herself. They all seemed to think that she should submit to stay in tutelage and acquiescence, asking nothing and arranging nothing until her husband should at his good will and pleasure deign to recall once more the fact that she existed.

Their names were great, no doubt, and their lives were before the world; but if he chose to sully them and give them to idle calumny, it was no fault of hers.

There was a brief and tempestuous winter session then on, from which it was impossible for Aubrey to absent himself even a day. Even if he could have done so, it might have been the cause of more harm than good, he thought, if he forced his presence upon her in the journey on which her heart was set. Even his cousin himself, uncertain of temper and capricious in his judgments, might look on such interference with wrong interpretation of it. He saw nothing that he could do for the time being except to leave her to her own choice of action. Things might, perchance, become better than he feared they would do.

He knew that it is of little use to try to be the providence for other lives. The unforeseen is sure to intervene, and accident at every moment overturns the schemes and the wishes of man with a fractiousness which no one can prevent.

"You must take your own way, my dear," he said, with a sigh, "I hope you will never regret it."

Then he accompanied her on to the vessel and bade her farewell.

The night was cold but clear, a sparkling frosty sky and a scarcely ruffled sea. He held her hand a moment in his as he parted from her on the deck.

"I am sorry I cannot come with you to Paris," he said, with a great coldness despite himself still in his tone. "But I must be in the House to-night by eleven at latest. God bless you, dear; since you will go, be prudent and be unselfish. Women suffer much at times no doubt from the selfishness of men, but sometimes I think they repent their own more bitterly when they give way to it. And how often mere selfishness is called love!"

Then he let her hand go, and left her standing on the deck of the steamship under the clear cold skies.

His heart was heavy as a special train carried him backward in his solitude to Westminster as fast as steam could bear him through the night.

"You filled my barren life with treasure;
You may withdraw the gifts you gave,"

he thought in the words of the unknown writer to which he had taken a causeless fancy. "Nay, she has given me no treasure at all, and she takes away nothing because she gave nothing. The gift was given to a life not barren, but already over full, and I have no part or share in either her pleasures or her joys. Why should I have? She has used me like a good big dog which could swim through some rough currents to save her; but she is now in the deep sea, and if she can be saved it cannot be by me."

And that tempter which dwells in the heart of man, and which he had once said at Ladysrood made it almost possible to believe in the old-world myths of devilish agencies, whispered to him now that if he had been less loyal, if he had done as other men would have done, if he had used his many opportunities and his power of influence over her to turn her heart away from his cousin, and win it in its revulsion and reaction to himself, he would have done no more than what nearly every man would have done in his place, and in the issue she might have been consoled, and he at the least been happy.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE steamer meantime passed on its little voyage through the still frosty air, and over the liquid darkness of the sea. Gladys, enwrapped in her black sables, stayed on deck insensible to cold. She was only conscious of the febrile excitement within her, and of that momentary solace which is always found in any physical movement which relieves or distracts great anxiety.

She went straight to Paris, and descended at an hotel instead of at the house which Guilderoy rented in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, and which was then shut up and left in charge of the Suisse. She did not wish her movements to be known to any one. She inquired at the English Embassy where Lord Guilderoy was. With some surprise and, she thought, some embarrassment, his friends there told her that they be-

lieved he was in Venice still; they had heard no change of address from him. She left them to think or conclude what they chose, and went to Venice as Aubrey had done before her. At his palace, were they received her with obsequious deference, she heard that he had left there three weeks before, but where he was they could not say: he had left no address. She perceived that it was an excuse, a falsehood, but they were at least loyal to the instructions they had received; she did not try to bribe them into disobedience, which could easily have been done. She paused for a few days at the house, which was always kept in perfect readiness for his arrival. She thought it probable that he might return.

It was cold in Venice, but it did not seem so to her after the north winds which had been sweeping over the woods and moors of Ladysrood when she had left it. The sun was radiant; the green canals still basked in light, the silvery lagoons bore the little islands on their breasts, the Istrian brigs were unloading their loads of wood in the Giudecca, the Greek traders were landing their varied cargoes at the custom-house, the many coloured fleet of the little fishing vessels anchored off the Schiavone and the Botanic gardens; the scene was always charming, various, gay, a panorama of moving, noiseless, delicately-tinted life.

She acknowledged its charm; but it made her heart almost heavier than it had been under the wintry shadows and dusky mists of Ladysrood. As she let the gondoliers take her over the water and thread their way with unerring accuracy through the crowded craft of the Canale d'Orfano, she lived over again every moment

of the first weeks she had passed in Venice. All that passion spent on them seemed to her like a dream; some remembered poem that could have nothing in common with her own life. The woman can never habituate herself to the early and abrupt cessation of all love's instincts and caresses, which to the man seems so natural and so inevitable. To her that fairy story should be told with the same ardour every recurrent year; to him it is as dead as last year's leaves.

At times, as she drifted through the silvery wintry air, she blamed herself, recalling every word of counsel which her father and Aubrey had addressed to her.

She had been unwise, she knew, to speak as she had last spoken to her husband. She had been unwise to reject his proposal to travel with her into distant lands; she had done wrong to repulse so coldly that share in her sorrow which he had offered her with sincere and delicate sympathy. All this she knew, but the vision of his other passions had stood between him and herself, and there was now for ever sounding in her ear the avowal of his love for Beatrice Sorìa.

That one bitter and restless remembrance haunted her, and would not let her stay in peace amongst the gliding waters and soothing stillness of Venice. She did not know where he might be. She could not write to inquire of mere strangers. She had the whole of the Italian journals which were sold at the news-stalls bought and brought to her. He was so well known in Italy that she thought his movements would be observed and chronicled, however much he might try to guard against it.

For several days she saw nothing; on the ninth day she read in one of the sheets a little line announcing that he was still in Naples. She knew from the Venetians that he had left them some twenty days before. It seemed to her clear as the golden moon rising above the Euganean mountains that he was with her rival.

The voice of her father seemed to say to her from his grave, "Do not go thither; do not try to compel fate."

She had done all that she could do to keep off the inquisitiveness of society; she had done more than many would have done to offer a serene and harmonious surface-existence to the stare of curiosity and malignity. But, beneath all that, the aching heart of her youth was angered and seething like a sea in storm; under all her apparent and enforced composure the blindest and maddest of all the passions, jealousy, was tearing her soul asunder.

"I have a right at least to know," she told herself a thousand times, lying awake in what had been her nuptial chambers; listening to the lapping of the water on the marble stairs below all the long nights through, until the sound of the cannon fired at sunrise on the Giudecca told her that another dreary, empty, anxious, desolate day had come.

"I have a right to know," she thought, and, allowing Aubrey's letter to be unanswered, she left the Venetian sea-mists and water-ways, and went, also, southward through the amber sunrays and the roseate lights of a luminous winter's day spreading with noon-tide golden and glorious over the lagoons and the meadows beyond Mestre.

CHAPTER XIV.

It was now the close of November. Beatrice Sorìa was at the great palace of the Sorìa, fronting the sea, where she still ruled supreme by virtue of her young children over whose lives she was left sole and complete guardian. This palace was one of the marvels of the south, built by Angelo Fiori, with ceilings by Domenichino, and frescoes by Simone Papa; its façade dominated the sea; to its rear stretched large and beautiful gardens. It was here that Guilderoy had first succumbed to her charm in one soft, gay, Neapolitan winter, which ever remained on the memories of both of them as the one perfect page in their book of life.

It was years ago now; but every detail and hour of it seemed to come back to him as on a magic glass, as he saw the long white majesty of the great house tower above its stairs and terraces, and mole of marble. Every delicious and enchanted moment passed there revived in his remembrance; all that their intimacy had had of storm, of dispute, of doubt, of jealousy, of too arrogant dominion, had all faded from his mind as though they had never been. His memories retained only the glow and glory of its noontide light. He utterly forgot the thunder clouds which had often broken over the golden beauty of those days of love.

When at length he roused himself from these memories as he stood on the strip of shore below and gazed at the mass of sculpture towering above him, he

mounted the great stairway from the sea and asked of the porter at its gates if the Duchess Soria would receive him: he was met by an inflexible denial. Her excellency received no one except from four to six o'clock every Saturday afternoon, and again on Monday evenings from ten. It was then Tuesday.

"With the crowd!—never," he said to himself; and turned away, with feverish impatience and an aching heart.

He passed the day wandering beside the sea or in the streets.

At night he wrote to her: the first letter he had addressed to her since that in which he had announced his marriage. His declarations were as ardent and as comprehensive in it as those of Tibullus to Cerinthus in the thirteenth *Carmen* of the fourth book. He received no answer; and he was as wretched as Cerinthus's lover.

On the third day after he had sent it, his heart beat breathlessly at sight of a large envelope, with the two gold crowns on it, directed in the handwriting which he had once known so well, and which had sent him letters which at one time he had worn in his breast and which at another time he had held to a lighted match and burnt.

He opened the envelope with intense anxiety and suspense. But it contained only a card printed in gold which announced that the Duchess Soria might be visited in "*prima sera*" on Monday evenings. There was no written word with it; only his name filling up the blank space left for that purpose on the card.

"Can any woman forget so utterly?" he thought in

passion and pain, oblivious that if she had learned the lesson of forgetting, he had been the first to teach it to her.

His pride told him to leave Naples at once without seeing her; he felt that there was neither dignity nor courage in remaining a suppliant at the gates of one who once had been wholly his.

The remonstrances of Aubrey haunted him with persistent reproach, and for the first time in his life he saw his own conduct in its true light. But the ascendancy which Beatrice Sorìà possessed over him was stronger even than the impulses of pride. He could not bring himself to leave the scene of their former joys, the place where soonest, if ever, her heart would return to him on the impulse of memory.

Moreover, others who admired or adored her, others freer than he to prove their homage, had followed her thither also; and an intense jealousy of all that was possible in her future held him. There, as of old, in those smiling seas, the sirens had held too reckless mortals in their power, and so hers held him now upon these shores. He remained, as though he were a boy of twenty, spending his hours beneath the sea-walls of her palace, and trusting to some favouring hazard to afford him that unwitnessed interview with her which he sought. He did not accept her permission to approach her with the crowd at her receptions. He felt that he could not trust himself to see her first again before a throng, of which many would be strangers and all would be odious to him. Every day at sunset she drove, like other great ladies of the city; and every day at sunset he was standing or riding near when her great

bronze gates unclosed. She gave him a salutation and a smile, but never checked her horses. He saw, or imagined that he saw, in the smile a triumphant mockery of himself. He was mistaken: it was merely the slight smile of courtesy which any well-bred woman gives to an acquaintance.

There was no movement of society at that time in the city. The great world of Naples never bestirs itself until carnival comes. The populace were wild and mirthful in the streets as usual, but none of the great houses were opened except hers. She had all the customs of a wider world than that of the Neapolitans, and had never been bound by their observances.

The empty and fruitless days succeeded one another, and brought him nothing that he wished. At last he remembered that golden key which the classic lovers of this soil recommend to those who would see unclosed a door too cruelly shut against them. All things are saleable still in the land of Ovid and Tibullus, and the honesty of no guardian of the *lares* is more proof now than then against a bribe. He saw, and looked at enviously, in the high wall of the garden, the iron grating of the postern gate, by which he had used to have the right of entrance at his pleasure. The same creeping plants hung over it as in other years; the same blackbirds plucked at the black berries of its flowering ivy; the same great magnolia trees shrouded it in deepest shade; the same sound of falling water came from the fountains behind it, and the same cripple lay on the road in front of it, stretching out his brown and filthy hand for alms. Nothing was changed except himself, nothing gone except his privileges. He even heard

the very voice of the same dog as, roused by the sounds of his footsteps, it ran barking along under the wall within.

In time, and with some difficulty—for the dependents of the Soria palace valued their place and feared to lose it—the potent talisman of gain succeeded in drawing back the rusted bolts of the little iron door, and the underling, who had betrayed his mistress for a handful of paper money, held back the dog as Guilderoy passed into the evergreen shades of the familiar garden paths. But the dog, escaping from the gardener's hold, ran to him and leaped joyfully on him.

"Poor Pyrrho, do you remember me? You are more merciful than your mistress!" he murmured, as he caressed the dog, profoundly touched by its affectionate welcome. He walked on under the deep aisles of bay and laurel.

It was dark here in the gardens, though only the first stars had risen over the sea. He had chosen the hour at which she would be sure to have returned from her drive; her dinner-hour was not until nine, he knew, and when she came in it was her habit to sit alone awhile in a small room hung entirely with allegorical paintings by Albani, and having great windows looking towards the sea; it served her as a boudoir and a library in one. Here, again and again, hundreds of times he had found her of old reading some new German or French book of philosophy, or the verses of some Latin poet.

He entered the house by the garden loggia and the apartments which were called the garden-rooms. The servants were then closing the shutters for the night;

but they knew him and were not surprised to see him there, and one of them ushered him without question through the house to the little chamber which was called the Salotto dell' Albani.

She was seated with her back to the door, reading, or seeming to read. The light from the lamp fell on the dark gold of her hair, which was the hair of Palma Vecchio's Barbara. He could only see the crown of her head, and one fold of her velvet gown, the hue of the dark side of an olive-leaf; all else was hidden by the carved back of her large chair.

He saw her thus through the parting of the velvet curtains hanging before the door. Two lamps were burning low, and shed a roseate light on the room; the windows, still unshuttered, showed the serene night, in which a flush of day still lingered.

He motioned the servant backward, and the man, who had known him well in other days and had then always let him enter unannounced, allowed him to do so now, and closed the door noiselessly.

In a moment, before the Duchess Sorìa had even looked up from the volume she was reading, Guilderoy had crossed the room and was at her feet.

She withdrew her gown from the eager clasp of his hands, and a flush of anger rose over her face.

"You have bribed my servants!" she said with unutterable scorn.

"You left me no other way. You would not answer me. You would not see me alone."

"Why should I see you alone? As for answer I already answered enough—more than enough—at Aix."

"It is an answer which I will not take!"

"You must take it, since it is my will to give it."

She withdrew her hands from his hold with something of the violence which he had once known in her.

He kissed the folds of her skirts.

"I will not take it; I do not believe in it. All can never be over between *us*. Here, in this sacred room, which heard my earliest vows to you, I swear that you are the only woman whom I have ever loved in my whole life."

"To how many women have you said so? And how dare you recall vows which were only uttered to be forsworn?"

"I have said so to no other woman. No other—living or dead."

"You have said so at least to your wife?"

"Never. I never loved her."

"Then why did you marry her? No woman can have either compassion or respect for any man who knows what he wishes so little as that."

He coloured with offended pride and irritated pain.

"I am human," he said angrily. "Men have never, that I know of, in any part of the world's history, been conspicuous for consistency where their passions were involved."

"Do you not understand what an insult to all passion such inconsistency is?"

"No; passion is, in its very essence, wayward and shifting as the winds. You reproach me with my mutability. But you only do so because you will not endeavour to understand. It is only comprehension that is ever pitiful."

She looked at him with a long gaze, under which his own eyes fell.

"I think I understand you perfectly," she said in her low, sweet, dreamy voice. "You study your own pleasure. You do not consider anything beyond it. I loved you immensely. It is no flattery to you to say so since, for nearly seven years, I never disguised it from you, and the grave of your child is there in attestation of it. You knew that you were my world; yet the moment that a new caprice attracted you, you dismissed me with scarcely more consideration than you would have shown to a *femme entretenue*. I said nothing; I could not avenge it, and women of my character do not complain or appeal. Now, because you see me sought by other men, or because perhaps your feeling for me was of a deeper kind than you knew, you are as ready to throw aside your allegiance to others as you were ready then to throw aside yours to me for them. Why should I give you either pity or credence? Why should I believe in the strength of feelings which have never been more stable than a marsh-light which flits hither and thither? You do not know what love is. You have too much self-love to know it."

He sighed as he heard her; his conscience told him that there was truth in the charge. Yet he knew that his love for her was very great; what proof could he give her which would persuade her of its strength?

"You are unmerciful like all women," he said at last. "May I, without offence, tell you a truth also? I did love you greatly—as much as it is in me to love at all. But you tried me often. You were too exact-

ing, too imperious, too passionate. We always revolt when we feel the curb. It was a momentary impatience; not of you, but of the dominion you sought to have over me, which made me fancy that in marriage I might perhaps find greater tranquillity and more genuine peace."

"Besides which, Lady Guilderoy was very lovely, and you wished for her, and you had never denied yourself any whim or any desire! It is very possible that I was unwise and exacting. Few women are otherwise; and I have one pretension I confess, one which you knew of old: I reign alone, or I reign not at all."

Guilderoy smiled wearily.

"Is that worthy of your knowledge of our weaknesses?"

"Perhaps not. I make no claim to consistency. But what I claim I give. The world considers me a coquette because I have power over men. But I have never been a coquette in the sense of dividing my affections. I will admit, even though it flatters you, that I have always been true to you though you were false to me."

He bowed his head and kissed her hands. His eyes were dim with tears.

"Did you doubt it?" she said with a little disdain. "How little our lovers know of us! Our hearts beat against theirs, and our lives mingle with theirs, and yet they go from us knowing no more of our real natures than if they had embraced things of wood or of wax! Is it stupidity, or indifference? I suppose it is the immense blindness of self-love. And you are all of you so blunt in your perceptions and so coarse," she

pursued. "If a woman has hazarded her position for you, though you know she is all yours, and is as faithful as Dido, as tender as Hero, yet in your rude and clumsy classifications you will, in your own thoughts, bracket her with Lydia and Laïs!"

She put his hands off hers almost roughly for a woman of such slow and languid grace of movement.

"Not I," he murmured, gazing at her with eyes in which she might read more than the worship of old.

"Oh yes! you—you more, perhaps, than most men. When you wrote me your letter of farewell you ended it in delicate phrases because you are a gentleman, but the truth which pierced through them was that you left me as you would have left any bought companion of your pleasures."

"No; ten thousand times no!" he said vehemently. "You imagined what was not there. You exaggerated the offence to you. Women always will. I might be ungrateful, unworthy, failing in appreciation and penetration as you say, but I never for a moment failed to render you the honour that you merit."

She smiled faintly.

"Since you left me how can you expect me to believe it? If you leave your wife to-morrow will she believe that you honour her?"

"Why will you speak of her?"

"We must speak of her. She exists."

"Let me forget that she does so!"

The same faint dreamy smile came on her mouth; he could not tell whether she believed or disbelieved him; whether she esteemed him true or false, whether

she loved him still or had put him wholly from her inner life.

"You must be aware that your offence to me is one which no woman who has any pride can pardon. You love me, you do not love me, you think you love me again, you vacillate, you doubt, you forsake, you adore, and you expect me to humbly await you while your heart oscillates to and fro, now close to mine, now leagues away from mine."

"I expect nothing," he said bitterly. "I have lost the right to expect, if I were ever happy enough to possess it. Only if you will tell me any test by which I can prove you my sincerity tell me what it is, and then you will learn whether I now speak on mere caprice or not."

She was silent, while all the light of her deep and lustrous eyes seemed to plunge into his and through them search his inmost soul. She was silent some moments, and she could hear the loud fast beating of his heart.

"There is only one test possible for me to accept or to believe in," she said at last.

"Tell me what it is; or, indeed, I will consent to it untold."

"Do not be too rash," she said, with a cold and momentary smile. "You must, however, know very well what it is. Leave your wife for ever and I shall believe in your love for me."

He turned away pale and he was mute.

"You hesitate?" she said with interrogation and disdain.

He sighed heavily.

"It is a demand which does not affect myself alone."

"Did your demand of the past affect yourself alone? What demand of love, or of life, can ever concern oneself alone?"

"You mean to leave her publicly?"

"Yes; nothing less than that. I will accept no divided allegiance. It was for her that you insulted me. It must now be her whom you surrender for me."

He was silent.

"My honour," he said at last, but he hesitated, and she filled up the sentence.

"Your honour! You mean your conventional deference to the world's opinion. You are weary of your wife, you shun, dislike, and avoid her, but you consider your honour saved, if you affect with her, for society, a union which has wholly ceased to exist either in fact or feeling. I tell you you know nothing of genuine passion or vital pain. You are honest neither to myself nor her."

He was silent; he breathed heavily; his heart was torn between conflicting emotions.

"Remember," said Beatrice Sorìà coldly, "I do not ask this of you; I do not even wish it; much less do I counsel it. I only say, as I have a right to say, that such alone is the proof of your sincerity which I can accept or credit. You already seek from me patience, forgiveness, and oblivion of no common sort. I have a right to answer that I can only give you these on certain conditions. You can fulfil them or reject them as you please. There was a time, I confess, when I could have died of the pain of your abandonment. But that time is past. You have taught me to live without

you. I can do so now and in the future. It is a lesson which no man who is wise teaches to any woman."

He sighed as he heard: the words were the same in meaning as those which Aubrey had spoken to him of his wife.

"What are your conditions?" he asked in a low voice. "Tell me more clearly. What is it you exact? Your right I admit; I have never denied it."

"What I have said. That you should leave your wife, and make it known to her that you leave her for ever. You will write a letter of farewell to her which I shall read and send. It is for her that you insulted and forsook me. It is her now whom you must sacrifice—if you are now in earnest."

He was silent a moment; then he walked to the table near on which were paper and pens and ink, and a litter of opened letters. "Tell me what to write," he said with the same sound in his voice, which was half sullen and half implored. He plunged one of the quills in the ink, and turned to her and waited.

"No. Not in that haste," she said; and she rose and closed her writing-table. "You shall not say or think in the future that I hurried you into an agitated and unmeditated act. Years ago we were mad like that, but such madness is over. Your choice must be deliberate and wholly voluntary. It will last out your life and mine. Go now. If you choose you can return to this room at this hour to-morrow. If not, leave Naples, and do not attempt ever again to see me or to speak to me, either alone or in the world."

Before he could reply or remonstrate she had

touched a handbell which stood near her; one of the men of the antechamber answered.

"Show my lord to his carriage," she said to the servant.

Guilderoy could not resist such dismissal. He kissed her hand with the slight salutation of an acquaintance and left her presence. The servant ushered him with ceremony through the house and out by the great gates of the sea front. He was scarcely conscious of what he did or where he went; and he found himself standing on the beach beneath the marble wall, with the placid sea before him shining under the stars, a few boats rocking in the silver of its surf.

CHAPTER XV.

UNNERVED, beset with a thousand conflicting emotions, divided between intense desire, and that honour which his education and his instincts made a second nature to him, Guilderoy left the hall and went home across the gardens to the palace which he had occupied half a mile away. The night was very brilliant; the stars seemed strewn thickly as diamond dust; all the ear-piercing and countless noises of the Neapolitan streets had ceased. There was no sound but that of the murmur of the sea. He walked through the white intense moonlight and the dim shadows, now passing some recumbent figure lying stretched in sleep upon the stones, some basket of violets whose tired seller had fallen asleep beside them on a marble stair, some

Madonna's lamp burning within a sculptured shrine. He looked at nothing, neither outward to the sea nor upward to the stars, nor downward at the slumbering beggars. His eyes only saw, as it were, painted on the radiant night, the face of Beatrice Sorla.

What she had demanded of him was a greater price than if she had asked of him the sacrifice of existence itself.

He was a man to whom the curiosity and comment of the world were intolerable; to whom the honour of his name had been always sacred and kept intact through all his follies and excesses; his attachment to John Vernon lying dead in his grave at Christslea was sincere, and his sense of the duty owing to his memory was strong.

The hours passed uncounted; he had no sense either of hunger or thirst; he was wholly possessed by the agitation of his senses and his emotions, and the struggle which was violent between his desires and his consciousness of what honour asked of him.

The memory of Gladys as he had seen her first on the moors in the pale autumn morning came over him with a pang of wistful repentance and regret. The recollection of her in the first days of her marriage to him smote him with the sense of having sacrificed some innocent and trustful animal on the altars of his own brief and destroying desires.

He knew that to both the woman whom he had married and the woman whom he had loved he had behaved with the unkindness which is the inseparable offspring of a purely selfish and physical passion. He saw himself for the moment as others saw him; and he

condemned himself as they condemned him in these solitary and bitter hours of self-examination.

What Aubrey had justly defined in him as a feeling not of affection but of egotism towards his wife, made it terrible to him to appear to other men as wanting in respect or in regard for her. He was sensitive to the insolence of public comment; and he abhorred the thought that through him the world would talk of her. He remembered her father with contrition and self-condemnation; he remembered his own violent self-will in insisting on the caprice of his momentary desires, and all the wisdom with which John Vernon had endeavoured to dissuade him from his folly. He could not possibly blame any one except himself. He could lay at no one else's door the difficulty and temptation in which he was now placed. He had blamed her indeed for want of sympathy and affection, but he knew that he had had little right to do so.

He passed the night hours pacing to and fro beside the sea. Once he bade a boatman row him out on to the moonlit water, and he watched from it the receding shores.

The boat drifted on under the stars on the open sea; the rower, half asleep, steering mechanically with his foot, and ever and anon idly dipping his oars into the waves. Guilderoy was stretched at full length, his head resting on the bench, his eyes watching afar off the stately pile of the Soría Palace towering against the moon-bathed clouds, whilst the fragrance of its orange gardens came to him over the waves. After all, it seemed to him, his first duty was to the one who dwelt there.

His marriage had been a supreme wrong done to her. If she could find reparation or consolation in his love now, he thought that he was bound in honour to afford them to her; at least his wishes led him to try and believe so. And he loved her more than he had ever loved any woman; her touch, her voice, her regard, stirred the very depths of his soul as no other's had ever done. Years of separation had given to his desires the freshness of a new passion, and the keen jealousy with which he had watched the homage of others had intensified it tenfold. He was in that mood in which a man feels that all other things may perish if his love be left to him; the cry of Faust, "I give my soul for ever so that this woman may be mine!"

It seemed to him that he never really lived save when he was with her. His senses were stimulated, his intelligence was aroused, his wandering fancies were captured and concentrated by her as they were by no other woman. The very indignity which he had inflicted on her, and which she had pardoned, endeared her to him; she had not clung to him in slavish humility, but she had loved him and forgiven him with a greatness which ennobled her in his sight. Such madness might be past with her; in him it was as living still as when, years before, he had first watched the stars rise over these waves and the moon shine on the pale sculptures of her palace. She believed that he was incapable of suffering; but he felt that he drank its fullest cup to the lees. She was the only woman on earth to him; the world seemed to hold no other. But a remorse which was in its way as strong as the desire of his soul was also at work within him. He

knew that he would act with surpassing disloyalty if he deserted so young a woman as his wife, and one so wholly blameless.

She had been unable to content him indeed; she had failed to correspond to some fanciful ideal which he had formed and imagined for a few months to be incorporated in her. She was not what he had wished or what he had cared for; but that was no fault of hers. She had promised him nothing which she had not fulfilled, and she had borne his name blamelessly through all trials.

In what she had said to him on the day that he had left Ladysrood she had been wholly justified by facts; and though he had so violently resented her words, his conscience told him that they were wholly deserved; that they had indeed been more forbearing than many a woman in her position would have made them.

As ludicrous and commonplace thoughts intrude themselves sometimes on the deepest and most tragic emotions, there recurred to his mind his conversation with his sister on the evening when he had announced to her his intended marriage; and of how he had replied to her prophecies of woe with the jest that no one ever abandoned his wife in these latter days, unless it were a workman who went off with the household savings to the United States. It had always seemed to him so easy to live so that the world need know nothing of private disunion or dissension; so easy to conduct existence on the smooth lines of outward courtesy and apparent regard; so easy to shut the door politely in the face of a staring world in such a manner that it

should imagine there was perfect felicity behind it. He had always been disdainfully censorious of those who had not the tact or the good taste requisite to preserve these externals of harmonious agreement which are all that the world demands. And now he himself was on the brink of affording to the world that spectacle of disordered passion and of public severance which had always seemed to him so coarse and so unwise!

Amidst all the heat and confusion of his thoughts there came over him the memory of John Vernon's pale calm features in the mask of death as he had seen them, with the summer sunlight falling soft and warm upon them, while the little birds had sung outside the casement underneath the leaves. The pang of an immense remorse, the throb of a great shame, stirred in his heart. Egotist though he was, given over to pleasure and indifferent to rebuke, he felt ashamed and guilty before the mute reproach of the dead man's memory.

"I gave you all I had," the voice of the dead seemed to say to him. "I gave it against my will, and I warned you that you would use it ill. What have you done with it? What will you say to me on that day when you, too, come before the tribunal of the grave?"

He shuddered as he lay under the golden December moon, shining cold as steel down on the steel-blue seas. What had become of his honour? Where was his good faith to the dead? To a living man he might have been untrue, had he chosen; but to be false to one who could never arraign him, never offend him, never rebuke him!—he seemed to grow a coward and

a liar in his own sight. All better things, all higher truths that he had ever believed in, awakened in his soul, and bade him suffer what he would, lose all he might, but be faithful to his word to one who was no more numbered with the living. He gazed at the faint white shore gleaming afar off under the moonlit skies.

"My love, my love!" he murmured, "I cannot be dishonoured even for you! He trusted me——"

The tears filled his eyes, and the shining seas and the starry skies grew dim to his sight.

"Put me ashore," he said to the boatman. His resolve was taken.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHEN he at last reached his own residence and crossed the court to enter his own apartments, it was nearly but not quite dawn. Large lamps swinging from the ceiling dimly lighted the two ante-chambers. In the second of them his body-servant was lying, fully dressed, face downwards, on one of the couches, tired out with his long vigil. Guilderoy, sunk in the gloom of his own thoughts, did not even see the man, and passed on to the three large rooms which divided the vestibule from his bed-chamber.

It was an old palace; lofty, spacious, magnificent, faded and dull. Busts of dusky yellow marble, weird bronzes stretching out gaunt arms into the darkness, ivories brown with age, worn brocades with gold threads gleaming in them, and tapestries with strange and pallid

figures of dead gods, were all half revealed and half obscured in the twilight. As he moved through them, a figure which looked almost as pale as the Adonis of the tapestry and was erect and motionless like the statue of the Wounded Love, came before his sight out of the shadows. It was that of Gladys.

He paused, doubting his senses. With her long black robes and her pale features she looked rather a creature of the grave than of the earth, in the faint and fluctuating light which fell on her from the swinging lamps above.

For some moments neither of them spoke.

"What has happened?" he said at last, instinctively. "Why are you here?"

He expected to hear of some calamity, of Ladysrood burnt down, or of his kindred dead. She was silent. She was deadly pale; there seemed nothing alive in her except her intensely searching eyes, which gazed at him.

"For the love of God do not look at me like that!" he cried involuntarily. "What has brought you from England? Why do you wait for me at such an hour?"

"It is the hour at which you have left the Duchess Sorla," she said, in a voice which was low but harsh.

His worn face flushed.

"That is absolutely untrue! I left her house at eight this evening."

She gave an impatient movement which said without words, "Why lie to me?"

"I tell you that I left her house at eight," he repeated. "You shall not insult her in my hearing."

"But you may insult me in hers!"

"I never insult you. I speak of you always with the most unfeigned respect. But if you begin to track me, to lie in wait for me, to spy on me, to catechise me, I tell you honestly that I shall respect you no more, nor will I patiently endure such espionage."

All the gentler and more remorseful emotions towards her with which his breast had been filled as he had paced the solitary shores and the deserted streets had been destroyed in an instant by the sight of her in his apartments and by her mention of the one name dearest to him.

"Who has a right to be near you if not I?" she asked with a haughty anger which scorched up the tears that mounted to her sight.

"No one disputes your right," he answered with great impatience. "But between right and welcome there are many leagues; and the title to come to me unbidden I would never award to any woman were she ten thousand times over my wife."

"I am come to solicit nothing from you," she said coldly.

"Oh no! Only to watch for me, to trace out my actions, to question me, to fetter me, to haunt me, to offend me!——"

"Is it so strange that I wished to see you, to know something of you? For three months you have not written to me, only to your servants; I heard that you were here; here with her—the only woman whom you have ever loved—so you told me!"

Her words were broken, and her voice had a great emotion in it; but that which would have touched him

in his mistress only angered him the more intensely in his wife.

"I forbid you to bring her name into this discussion!" he said with more passion. "You choose to follow me, and to make me reproaches; it is the way of women; they only lose all by it, but they are never deterred. I came away from you because you asked me intolerable questions and wearied me with useless scenes; if I have not loved you it has not been my fault. Love is not to be whipped into obedience like a straying child."

"Why marry me?"

"What is the use of saying that again and again? You said it in London; you said it at Ladysrood. I deceived myself, and so I deceived you—with no thought or desire of deceit. When a man tells a woman candidly that he mistook his love for her, what more is there to say? He should ask her pardon, perhaps, for the wrong he has unintentionally done her. In that sense I ask yours."

She did not reply.

"It is better you should know," he continued rapidly. "You will not care perhaps. If not, so best. I was about to write to you. I am true to an allegiance promised before I promised mine to you. I am aware the world does not recognise such unwitnessed vows, but they are all love cares for; they are all that ever really hold love, let men say what they will. I must tell you, since you are, here, the entire truth. I can give you no more of my life; I can live no longer in a feigned harmony which has wholly ceased to exist if ever it did exist. I do not think it ever did between us; you

may hate me, and the world may execrate me; but so it must be henceforth."

He paused in strong emotion; he was neither heartless nor ungenerous, and he knew that his words must of necessity sound both. He hated to give pain to any living creature; and though she seemed so cold and still that he doubted, as he had always doubted, her feeling greatly, yet he knew that any woman must suffer, so addressed, even if she only suffered in her pride.

He waited for her to reply; but she said nothing. She stood motionless with perfect tranquillity.

The words were honest and truthful, but to their hearer they seemed cruelty and brutality incarnate. Had not her pride restrained her, she could have cried aloud like some animal in torture. But she was very proud, and whatever agony she might suffer afterwards, she had force to hold back any expression of it now. Moreover, a consuming jealousy was upon her, giving her temporary strength; and yet her whole existence seemed racing and whirling from her as a great river courses in its haste and storm towards the bottomless sea. She looked at him where he stood under the falling light from the lamp, pale, agitated, angered, and she could have thrown herself upon his breast and cried to him, "I love you! I love you! give me some place—the least, the lowest—but some place in your heart!"

But pride kept back that yearning impulse; she stood, erect and cold, in her black clothes, with the sombre light of an unutterable reproach burning like flame in her dark blue eyes.

"You are, again, the lover of the Duchess Soria?" she said doggedly.

It was the most fatal thing she could have said, but she was not wise enough to know that. Guilderoy's face flushed hotly; he felt all the impotent fury of a man forced to say what it seemed infamous to say no matter how he might reply.

"If to adore her be to be her lover, then I am so," he said with violence. "In no other sense—now—as *yet*."

She heard the first declaration; she gave no credence to the second; she thought it the mere conventional declaration with which a man deems it necessary in honour to deny his relations with a woman.

"I came to hear this from your own lips," she said with perfect coldness. "I have heard it. There can be no longer any doubt. I will go now."

"Go where?" he asked in vague uneasiness.

"That cannot matter to you. Farewell!"

His anxiety deepened despite his anger and his preoccupation. Her manner seemed to him unnatural. Its serenity was not in keeping with the burning pain and rebuke spoken in her eyes.

"Why will you make me these scenes?" he said wearily. "I was thinking of you kindly when you lay in wait for me thus. I cannot endure surveillance, interference, espionage, and when you speak of the woman I love more than all others on earth you madden me."

She smiled bitterly.

"I will leave you to that other woman. Surely you can ask no more. Believe me, I shall make neither

complaint nor scandal. I remember what my father wished. Your name and his are safe with me."

"I will write to you," he said hurriedly, embarrassed and distressed. "All possible arrangements or consideration shall be made;—all that I have is yours." I am deeply sensible of the injury I have done to you in making you my wife when you were too young to know my character or your own, or measure the feelings of either of us. But if your father sees now, as some say the dead can see the souls of the living, he will know that I was entirely honest in all that I promised then, both to him and to yourself."

His eyes were dim and his voice was uncertain as he spoke; a great emotion moved him, and it seemed to him that she felt nothing whatever—nothing save some indignant scorn, perhaps at most some outraged pride.

"She does not really care; she knows nothing of love," he thought. It seemed to him that any woman who had loved him would have either poured out to him all the furies of a disappointed and deserted passion, or have fallen at his feet weeping in agonised supplication.

But she gave no sign either of violence or of wretchedness.

At her father's name her mouth trembled, and he thought for a moment that her composure would desert her; but she soon recovered it. Whatever she felt, she betrayed none of it.

"Be good enough to let me pass," she said coldly; and mortified, humbled, yet angered with a sense of injustice done to him as though he were the offended, not the offender, he drew back and let her go as she desired.

"Where are you going?" he said with hesitation. "You cannot go like this, all alone, in a strange city."

"My servants are waiting. I will return to England. Why do you even ask me? it cannot matter to you!"

"It must matter."

He was confused, agitated, passionately angered, and yet all the while conscious of a vague fear that in her strange stillness and repose she would do something rash and irrevocable, something which would haunt him all his life long with remorse.

"Let me pass," she said, with her forced serenity unbroken. "I have told you I leave you free; what more can I say? You need fear nothing for any tragedy which might embroil you with your world. I shall go home."

But as she went out before him through the bare dim rooms, her step unfaltering and her head erect, he realised how impossible it was to let her leave him thus unprotected—a woman who was his wife, who was as young as she and as fair to look upon, alone in the streets of such a city as Naples was at such an hour.

"I must accompany you at least," he said as he overtook her. "You cannot go out in these streets alone—I will take you wherever you will."

Then, and then alone, her self-control forsook her; she turned upon him with the rapid and violent action of some animal wounded and tormented beyond its power to bear.

"When my whole life is destroyed by you, can you insult me by offering me mere formal external courtesies? Can you think that it would matter to me if any beggar

of these lanes stabbed me and dragged my body to the sea? What do you know of love, of grief, of pain, of sacrifice? Nothing—nothing—nothing—no more than those marble gods that stare there in the dusk. Let me go! You shall not stir one step with me. I have told you that my servants wait below. There shall be no tragedy such as you fear should hurt your reputation as a man of honour with the world!”

Then, with the swiftness of that step with which she had once gone careless and light-hearted through the moorland gorse, she went through the shadowy chambers, past the still sleeping servant, under the great brazen lamp burning in the entrance, and down the marble stairway of the silent house.

He did not follow her.

All the gentleness and self-reproach with which he had thought of her in the night just passed died utterly out of him under the sting of her disdainful and cutting words. Though she, like the woman whom he loved, charged him with insincerity and heartlessness, he knew himself that he had neither; he knew that, whatever he appeared to both of them, he suffered with genuine emotion and with true self-reproach. He had said no word to her which had not cost him more to utter than it cost her to hear. He had ideals and dreams of what could never now be realised, and he had the instinctive honour of a nature both proud and sensitive. Even though he had no feeling for her of affection, she might still have kept him by tenderness; but her words, which had struck him to the quick, had hardened against her all the feelings of his soul. Beatrice Sorìà might rebuke and might condemn him,

but she at the least loved him with a passion which forgave all, if it in turn exacted all.

Through the iron gratings of the large unshuttered windows of his rooms the first white light of day came faintly through the duskier lamplight, falling on the pale figures of the tapestried hangings and the yellowed marbles of the Cæsars and the gods.

He threw open the casements and let the sharp, clear, cold air of earliest day pour past him into the shadows of the rooms. When the sun rose he sent three lines to the Sorìa Palace:

"I found her here. I told her the truth. We are parted for ever. When may I come to you?"

They brought him in answer three words only:

"When you will."

CHAPTER XVII.

A FEW evenings later Lady Sunbury was in her own house of Illington in the midst of a large circle of guests. It was two hours after midnight, her drawing-rooms and ball-room were full; everyone was amused and amusing; she was going from one to another with bland smiles and suitable phrases, her harassed thoughts all the while with her elder daughter, who was encouraging the wrong suitor, and her second son, who was lying dangerously wounded in India.

In the midst of her occupations and preoccupations, at the moment when the cotillon was at its height, one of her servants called her away and presented to her a

letter which had been brought by a messenger from Italy. She recognised in the superscription the handwriting of her brother's wife, and on the seal the coat-of-arms of the Vernons.

"How exactly like her absurd extravagance!" she thought with contempt. "How exactly like her to send a servant all the way by express with a letter, just as if we were in the days of the Stuarts or Tudors! What does she suppose that the postal service and the electric wires exist for, I wonder?"

Innovations in trifles always annoyed her more than anything else; she was so extremely irritated at this folly of her sister-in-law in sending a man-servant to carry a letter by hand from the continent to England, that in her annoyance at the trivial eccentricity she almost forgot her curiosity and apprehension as to the possible contents of the packet.

She took it, however, to her boudoir, and there, being alone, opened and read it. The letter was written by Gladys from Rome, and began without prefix or preliminary.

"Do not blame your brother for anything that you may hear of him. The fault is altogether mine. I am not a woman who could possibly make him happy as his wife. I am cold, hard, and unforgiving. My father even told me so more than once before he died. Therefore blame me entirely, and not Lord Guilderoy, for our ensuing separation. There need be no publicity or scandal of any kind. I am sensible of the many gifts I have received from him, and I shall not return them with ingratitude. But neither will I see him, nor speak with him, nor live under the roof of any of his

houses. Except that he cannot marry again whilst I live, he will be as free as he was before we unhappily met that autumn day upon the moors. I hope that you will tell him so from me. I shall take none of my jewels nor shall I touch a farthing of my income from my settlements. What I have inherited from my father is quite enough for me to live upon. I have no children living, so there need be no question whatever of the interference of lawyers. I shall reside at the cottage at Christslea, so that you can all judge for yourselves that my manner of life is worthy of my father's memory. But I beg that you will none of you seek for a moment to attempt to change the resolution which I have taken, for it is unalterable, and interrogation and expostulation would be only unbearably painful to me. You will, I entreat, lay all blame which may be incurred upon me. The world has always considered me ill-suited to him. It will not be astonished that a union so inharmonious should be ended by that want of sympathy and temper which it has always attributed to me. You have often reproached me with doing nothing to save your brother's honour. I now at least do what I can. You repeatedly condemned me for poor-spirited silence. Be sufficiently just not to condemn me now for acting as you have frequently more than hinted to me that I should do."

The signature was Gladys Vernon.

When Hilda Sunbury had read the letter through to the end, her first impulse was to start at once for the south; the next moment she remembered that it was impossible and would be useless to do so; she could not leave Illington for any length of time with her

house full without her absence being known; and what had been already done in Naples was hopeless and irrevocable. After an instant's meditation she sent for her eldest daughter.

"I have had news which must take me to Balfrons to-night," she said to her daughter. "You know my uncle is lying very ill there. I do not wish anyone to know that I am absent. I shall return the day after to-morrow. You can say I am indisposed from cold and have to keep my room. Make no fuss. Amuse everyone. Be discreet, and do as you would do if I were here. I shall be back in thirty-six hours. Say nothing to your father. It is not worth while. He would only ask innumerable questions."

Then with the utmost speed and quietness she left the house, drove seven miles to take the morning train to the north, succeeded in reaching it on the eve of its departure, and hastened as fast as steam could bear her across the length of England to where the mighty keep of Balfrons rose above its oak woods and faced the Cheviots. She knew that Aubrey was there.

With the open letter in her hand, she passed unannounced into the library where he was seated alone. He was at Balfrons for two days only. His father was ill, and was at that age when any slight illness may easily pass into the last ill of all. No one was staying at the Castle except the Duchess of Longleat and her two younger children.

He rose in amazement and alarm as his cousin entered, for it was nearly midnight.

"Gladys?" he asked instinctively, thrown off his guard.

Lady Sunbury cast down the letter on the table before him.

She was pale with passion, which she had nursed in all its heat and strength during the lonely hours in which she had sped through the cold dark winter country from Buckinghamshire to Berwick.

"What did I say?" she cried, her voice hoarse with fatigue and indignation. "Did I not always tell you that you would encourage her in her sentimental, head-strong, insensate follies until she would bring disgrace upon us all?"

Aubrey took up the letter, having in that moment's pause recovered his self-possession.

"'Disgrace' is a very large word, and not a common one in our families," he said slowly. "Let me see what she has said to warrant its use."

He read the letter slowly, so slowly that Lady Sunbury's impatience became well-nigh ungovernable. She did not know that every word of it went to the innermost heart of the reader with that deepest of all sorrows—that which is powerless to aid the life beloved.

He held it in his hand when he had finished its perusal.

"What is it you blame so much?" he asked. His cousin, seated opposite to him at the great table at which he had been writing when she had entered, grew red with indignation and suppressed feeling.

"What? what?" she repeated. "Everything, surely everything, shows the most wanton disregard for us, the most theatrical resolution to obtain publicity, the most intolerable selfishness, the most obvious intent to

ruin my brother in the world's esteem! And to write it to me—to me! You are her confidant and confessor; you have always been so; why could she not send such a declaration of her projects to you, if sent it must be at all?"

"It is natural that she should address you; a woman, and her sister-in-law," said Aubrey coldly. "But, pardon me, do you suppose such a deliberate resolution as this can be arrived at by anyone so young without some very great provocation to it? She does not say what it is; but I imagine that both you and I can guess."

Lady Sunbury's conscience stung her, remembering the scene which she had made to Gladys in the King's Alley at Ladysrood. But she was not a woman to acknowledge error.

"Very possibly she may have had things which pain her," she said slightly. "But other women have as much and more to pain them; and their sense of duty and of dignity serves to keep them silent."

"Yes, they keep 'silent' by leading a life of eternal disunion, bickering, and upbraiding as you do!" thought Aubrey as he answered aloud:

"I think you forget her youth; in youth these wrongs seem to fill heaven and earth; as women grow older they grow used to them, no doubt, as the camel grows to his burden. The letter seems to me irreproachable. She asks nothing; she demands nothing; she injures nothing; she sacrifices everything, and she allows you to place all the blame on her to the world. What can anyone do more generous than this? I fail to understand."

"You mean to say that there is nothing to be done!" she exclaimed.

"What should be done?" said Aubrey, with the only impatience which had escaped him. "If a woman decides to leave her husband, and he decides to live so that she has no choice but to leave him, who is to reverse that position? They can reverse it themselves, as long as there is no legal separation."

"And she is to be allowed to live in this insane manner in solitude in her father's cottage?"

"No one can prevent her doing so but Guilderoy, and it seems to me that he has lost all possible title to command her even if he wishes to do so, while it is most probable that he does not. There is no disgrace in her limiting herself to her own resources; there is even a certain dignity in it, as I consider!"

"Because you are bewitched and infatuated about her!" said his cousin with rude contempt.

Aubrey kept his temper marvellously.

"I believe I am neither one nor the other. I regretted her departure from England. At your request I endeavoured to dissuade her from it. I did not succeed. She was unhappy, and when a woman is so she is never very wise. I conclude from this letter that on her arrival in Italy she learned what did not make her happier. The steps she takes are extreme, that I grant, but they only injure herself, and there is no one except her husband who can have any possible power to try and turn her from them."

"He will not stoop to solicit a woman who leaves him."

"Stoop! You speak as though he were faultless

and she had committed some crime against him! You must know as well as I do that something much graver than his usual caprices must have moved her to write such a letter and take such a resolve. Do you suppose that a woman as young as she is voluntarily severs herself from all the pleasures, graces, and interests of life, unless life, as it is, has become wholly intolerable to her?"

"And her duties," asked Hilda Sunbury, with violence, "do they count for nothing? Is she to be allowed to play at tennis with the honour of my brother's family as her racquet?"

"My dear Hilda," replied Aubrey wearily, "you have always considered that all creation exists only for the honour of your family. To others creation may still seem to have some additional, though no doubt minor, objects in view. However, even from that point, I scarcely concede that you can violently censure Lady Guilderoy. She offers you all possible occasion for examination into her life; she simply announces her intention of not living with your brother or in any of his houses. If he cares, he will seek to change her decision; if he does not care, he will necessarily be glad of it. Anyhow there need be no immediate scandal; at any rate unless you are pleased to make it."

"I!" exclaimed his cousin, disbelieving her senses. "What do I most abhor if not to have a single breath of the world breathed on me? What have I not endured that society should never suspect what I have suffered? What women have not I compelled myself to receive in my own homes in order that the outrages

inflicted on me should not form food for social calumnies and ridicule? Who in the whole width of English society has been so constant and so resigned a martyr as myself to all the indignities which a man who does not respect himself does not hesitate to inflict on those whom he should respect? And then you presume to say that I—I!—I, shall bring about scandal concerning my brother's wife! It is herself who brings it. How can a woman do what she is doing without bringing about her ears a thousand hornets' nest of curiosity and misconstruction? How? Will you tell me that?"

"The hornets' nests will come no doubt. They are everywhere," said Aubrey, with a sigh of impatience. "My dear Hilda, forgive me if I speak plainly; your own life has been a painful one; you have spent it in acrimony, reproaches, futile efforts to make black white, and endless quarrels which have never furthered your purpose one hair's breadth. Your brother's wife, being unhappy, chooses a more drastic but a more dignified vengeance. There would be a third way open to any woman who had the strength, the patience, and the unselfishness for it, and I could wish that she had taken it. I endeavoured to persuade her to take it; but she is young, and in youth and in pain the feelings are treacherous counsellors. What more is there to be said? It is to your brother that you must go. It is useless to come to me. I am not the guardian of Lady Guilderoy, nor am I my cousin's keeper. I have no more whatsoever to do with this sad letter than my dog Hubert yonder. It is a mistake on her side, an error, and a grave one; but he has brought it about by a much darker fault on his own, and he cannot complain.

Neither you nor I can possibly interfere. We have no title to do so. If your brother acquiesce, all his relatives must acquiesce also. Of that no reasonable doubt can be urged for one moment."

The great dog, hearing his name spoken, rose and approached, and laid his head upon Aubrey's knee; his master stroked him with a sigh.

Passionate and injurious words rose to Lady Sunbury's lips, but she repressed them unuttered; she was pale with rage and offence, but she had sense enough not to insult a man whom the nation respected.

"You cannot altogether disclaim responsibility for her actions," she said with unkind and insolent meaning. "You have guided them for a long time. You must pardon me if I do not credit that this letter and the resolutions contained in it are altogether so unfamiliar to you as they assume to be. You were the last person who saw Lady Guilderoy in England, and everyone is aware that you have been for a long time her most cherished and trusted friend."

Aubrey rose to the full height of his great stature, and stood at the end of the great library table as he had often stood at the table of the House of Commons.

"You are a woman and my cousin," he said slowly. "Both persons are privileged in you. But be so good as to remember that I do not allow even a lady to cast a doubt on what I have said was a fact; and you will kindly take care not to hint the insult which you have just hinted outside the walls of Balfrons."

She was imperious, courageous, and full of dark and insolent suspicion, but, bold though her temper was,

and uncontrolled, she did not dare to affront or offend him farther, and she was silent.

"It is late," said Aubrey. "Allow me to accompany you to your rooms. You will see Ermyntrude in the morning. She retired very early, for she was fatigued with watching my father. To-night he is quieter and asleep."

Then with all courtesy and ceremony he waited on her across the halls and corridors and galleries of the great castle, and only bade her good-night at the entrance of that suite of rooms in the tapestried wing which were always set aside as hers, and which were warmed and illuminated for her now as though she had been expected there since noonday. He was not conscious that he had kept the letter from Gladys in his hand, and she had been too enraged and mortified to ask him for it.

He walked slowly back to his library in the midnight stillness; everything was hushed into greater quiet than usual that the rest of the old Marquis might not be disturbed. The lamps burned white between the armoured figures, the drooping banners, the trophies of arms, the massive and fantastic carvings of the oak-pannelled walls; his own steps sank soundless on the thick carpeting. Hubert followed him with noiseless velvet feet.

He paused before one of the great unshuttered casements, with their iron gratings, which had been there in the Wars of the Roses, and the blazonries of the House of Balfrons stained upon their glass. The night without was frosty and moonlit. There was snow on the ground, and snow lay on the roof, the turrets, the

corbels, the battlements of the mighty Border castle. The keep, round, massive, terrible-looking, like a fortress for giants in the starry night, towered up in front of him upon the other side of the quadrangle.

He had a deep and filial love for Balfrons, and if public life had not called on him for absence, he would seldom have left its treasure-house of books, and its great forests filled with wild cattle and red deer, and all water-birds and moor, birds which ever haunt the reedy meres of the old romantic Border lands.

He sat down in the embrasure of the window and read her letter over again, word for word, by the light of the lamp hanging above his head. There was not a sound in the house. The clouds swept past the casement in large moonlit, hurrying armies. The deep bell of the clock-tower tolled midnight.

"Every word of the letter sank into his heart like a knife. Every word thrilled with the violence, the misery, the despair of a great pride which was writhing under abandonment, outrage, and misconception. The step she had taken was unwise; it had a child's rashness, a woman's obstinacy, and a forsaken woman's recklessness; but there were a self-negation and an austerity in it which were in their error very noble, and touched chords in his own nature which responded to them.

"I think she would have been happy with me," he thought; and he sighed as he looked out at the cold and luminous night and the great keep towering to the skies.

But now, though he would have laid down his life to save her, he could not give her one hour of peace. A furious longing came over the calm, grave temper of

Aubrey to cast all other considerations, public and private, to the winds, and avenge her wrongs upon his cousin with the rude, frank championship of another age and country than their own. But reflection told him that such an act could do her only harm: could only give her name more completely to the world's tongues, and could only possibly awaken in her husband's mind doubts which would dishonour her, and give him, in his own eyes, a palliative for his own offence against her.

"I have no title to interfere," he thought sadly. "I am not her lover. Scarcely even did she at last accept me as her friend."

A thrill of what was to him degrading and criminal, because a selfish pleasure, passed through him at the memory of the utter loneliness to which she had condemned herself, the dangers, the barrenness of the future which she had shaped for herself. But he hated the cruel egotism of the thought; he spurned and checked it as it rose in him.

"How vile we are at heart!" he mused with disgust and shame for the momentary selfish hope which had intruded themselves on him in his own despite. "How odiously vile!—and yet God knows if I could by any personal sacrifice purchase her happiness there is none at which I would hesitate."

But what sacrifice could avail anything? Her happiness and her wretchedness lay in other hands than his.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It was a winter's day when the woman whom he loved reached the little cottage at Christslea, having travelled without ceasing, pausing only for one night in Rome, the night in which she had written the letter to her sister-in-law.

The bay was shrouded in the white fogs of a damp December; the waves were rolling heavily with a deep roar upon the beach; the winds were sighing amongst the leafless orchards and over the bare scarps of the cliffs.

She went into the little study, still crowded with her father's books and papers, and bolted the door, and sat down before the fire on the lonely hearth. All was still, grey, inexpressibly solitary. The little place was gay and fragrant and pleasant in summer time, when the hedges were full of the songs of birds, and the air full of the scent of wallflowers and stocks blossoming in the homely garden ways; but it was intensely melancholy in the winter season, with the silence of mist and cold brooding over its solitudes.

She shuddered as she looked at the narrow casements, where the glass was wet with the vapours of the morning, and the grey veiled landscape was dull and blotted like a drawing soaked in rain. It seemed an emblem of her future existence. She for the first time realised the choice which she had made, the thing which she had done.

From the time she had left the palace in Naples until she arrived here she had had no distinct sense of what had happened to her. She had been sustained by the violence and the fever of an intense passion, by the iron in her soul of an immense wrong; she had gathered a fictitious strength from the magnanimity and the dignity of her choice, and the calmness with which she had spoken to her husband had lasted throughout her journey homeward until this moment, when, having dismissed the servants who had accompanied her in London, she had come wholly alone to the little house where her father's memory was her sole companion, and would be her sole consolation in the future. Then, when, not heeding or replying to the startled and agitated questions of the two old people left in charge there, she came into this chamber where her father's presence seemed a living and near thing, the sense of all she had given up, of all she had accepted, came to her for the first time in all its nakedness and horror.

She did not regret what she had done: she would have done it again had she been called on to ratify her choice: it seemed to her the only thing which was left for her to do in common honour and in common courage; yet the pale and ghastly terror of it faced her on the threshold of this chamber like some ghastly shape. The want of the one familiar voice so often heard there, the one unfailing tenderness so often proved there, overcame her with the sickliness of irrevocable loss. The pale grey walls, the pallid vellum volumes, the white discoloured manuscripts, the dull misty windows, the cold hearth, seemed to her like so many mourners mourning with her.

"Father, father!" she cried piteously to the blankness which was around her; her silence alone echoed the cry.

With a gesture of agonised supplication, of heart-breaking prayer, she stretched her arms out, seeking some shelter, some embrace, some kindly hand. The narrow walls of the little book-room went round and round giddily before her sight; the casements narrowed into a single point of light. She fell face forward senseless upon the floor, and a great darkness like night closed in on her.

When she recovered consciousness she was lying on the little bed which had been hers in childhood, and she saw the withered brown face of the old woman who had kept house there from her earliest memories stooping above her in anxiety and wonder. She did not speak, she did not move; she lay still and gazed at the whitewashed walls, the sloping ceiling, the narrow lattice; and she remembered to what a future she had condemned herself. She saw always before her the face of her husband as she had seen it in the light and shadow of the Italian moonlight—cold, pale, angry, handsome—his eyes resting on her without a ray of tenderness in them, his lips speaking passionate declarations of his loyalty to her rival.

The long swoon, which had frightened the people of the house, had been due to cold, fatigue, long fasting, and great emotion. It left no evil result after it, and with a new and strange weakness making her limbs tremble and her brain turn, she went down the narrow stair in the morning light to take up that life which was henceforth to be her portion.

There was a fire burning on the study hearth, and the old folks had set some homely winter flowers in the grey Flemish jugs on the centre table. The pale sunshine of a fine wintry day was falling on the black and white lines of her father's drawings on the walls. She sank into his large writing chair before the table on which his last written sheet, with the pen on it, lay as he had left them on his last day of life, and she tried to realise this catastrophe which had befallen her, this earthquake which had shaken into ruins all her summer world.

The violent agitations which had followed on her arrival in Naples, the hurried and scarcely conscious journey homeward, the suddenness and irrevocableness of her own actions, had given her a stunned and bewildered feeling like that of a sleeper roused from his dreams to hear of some misfortune rudely told.

She had written her letter to her sister-in-law with clearness, force, and calmness, but with that effort her nerves had given way; a burning fever, a painful sense of exhaustion, had followed on it, and though she had controlled all outward sign of them until her arrival at Christ'slea, they left her enfeebled and unnerved. She was terrified by the violence of the passions which she felt, and which had been intensified by the control over them which she had maintained whilst in her husband's presence.

"Am I no better than this?" she thought, ashamed and appalled at the furies which raged in her breast. She leaned over the fire, shivering and hot by turns as if with ague. She did not regret her choice; she had no other which would have seemed to her endurable;

but the horror of her future was very ghastly to her, and as she sat alone in the little dull room, with the rime frost white on the panes of the window and the noise of the waves coming up through the silence, the memory of the gay southern sunshine in which she had left him, the perfumed air, the sparkling seas, the shores of the Sirens, was ceaselessly before her, and life seemed to her a burden too intolerable to be borne.

The slow dark day wore on; the clock ticked off its tedious hours; the fire burned bright or burned dull; there was no other change. The old dog who had been at her father's feet in his last moments lay beside her, lifting every now and then drowsy and tender eyes to her face. They brought her food, but she could not take it. She drank a cup of milk: that was all. She took up her father's Virgil, and tried to read the passages in which she had been used to take most delight, but she could make no sense of the familiar lines; the letters swam before her sight, and she laid the book down with a sick despair.

Would all her life be like this?—with every interest of art and intellect, every innocent pleasure of nature, every harmless charm of existence, made void and useless to her?

“Ah, how little my dear father knew!” she thought, seeing the red embers of the hearth through blinding tears. He had bade her make her love so great that no other woman could give its equal. What use were that? What avail to pour out gold at the feet of him who only sees in it mere dross?—to offer the universe to one who is only impatient of the gift?

There was nothing in her that her husband cared

for; what mattered it to him that she was altogether his, body and soul? He would in all likelihood be more grateful to her for an infidelity which should set him wholly free.

CHAPTER XIX.

As she sat thus till the sombre day grew to the third hour after noon, she heard the latch of the garden lifted and a man's footsteps crush the wet shingle of the pathway to the porch.

She rose, breathless, her heart beating to desperation with the wildness of a sudden hope.

She thought it possible that Guilderoy might have followed her there, might have repented of his choice, might have come to offer her his atonement and regret.

A terrible disappointment blanched her white face whiter still as the door opened, and she saw in the shadow of the passage-way beyond the lofty statue of Aubrey.

He was the best friend that she had on earth, but had he been her cruellest enemy the sight of him could not have hurt her more than it did then.

Aubrey came up to her and took her hands in his with unutterable tenderness and compassion.

"My poor child—my poor darling—how I grieve for you," he said with broken voice.

Then she knew that he must have read the letter which she had written in Rome.

"Yes, Hilda showed me your letter," he said, an-

swering the interrogation of her regard. "It shocked me. I would have given my right hand that you had not written it, still more that you had not been caused to write it. For it is a fatal error, Gladys."

"I could do no less," she said coldly. The reaction of the intense hope which had for a moment leaped up in her made her feel sick and faint; she disengaged her hands from his, and seated herself by the hearth in the great chair, her back almost turned to him.

"You could have done nothing at all. It would have been wiser," he said with infinite pity. "My dear," he added reproachfully, "only think what it is that you have done. What will you have made of your life? Could you not have had a little faith in my warnings?"

She hardened her heart against her truest friend; she gathered her pride about her coldly and stiffly; she saw in him only the messenger and mouthpiece of her husband's family.

"I have done nothing that any of Lord Guilderoys's friends can blame," she answered. "I have said nothing to any one of all my acquaintances, and I shall say nothing to any of them. I only ask to be left alone. I am sure that I am living as my father would have wished me to live, and I shall spend nothing but that which he has left me."

She spoke in a measured and constrained voice as to a stranger. She could not forgive Aubrey what she thought his preference of his cousin's cause and desertion of her own.

"You have done most unwisely," he said, with a sigh. "I am not defending my cousin, God forbid! He is beyond all defence, all excuse, and I should be

ashamed to attempt to give him either; but you would have had fuller sympathy from the world at large and greater comfort, I think, in your own thoughts if you had taken no active part in the destruction of your ties to him."

"I did nothing more than was my right," she said coldly.

"That I do not dispute. But, as I told you, a woman's rights are her rashest councillors. After all, dear, what has one human being of real 'right' over any other's life? To claim affection is idle. If it be no longer ours we must break our hearts as we will. We cannot bridle the winds. We must wait in patience till they blow again whither we would have them."

"Then no woman must ever listen to the words of any man!"

"I did not mean that. I meant that when we have the calamity to be loved no more we must revile neither man nor woman, we must look within. Maybe we shall there see the cause of our woe."

She flushed hotly with anger.

"How have I been to blame? It is not my fault that his caprice only lived a day."

Aubrey was silent. She understood that his silence was blame.

"You are unjust, like all his family," she said passionately. "I have made no scandal, no exposure, no publicity. I shall make none. What more can his friends demand? He is left in peace with the only woman whom he loves!"

"My dearest Gladys," said Aubrey wearily, "I am not defending him. It has gone hard with me not to

revenge you with old-fashioned violence which would have made him pay for your tears with his body. You may believe that not to do so has been the greatest effort of my life."

Her eyes softened and grew dim.

"Is that really true?"

"I do not say what is not true, dear."

She stretched her hand out to him. "I thank you very much," she said in a broken voice.

Aubrey kissed her hands with reverence and an emotion which he endeavoured to subdue.

"I am no lover or knight, my dear," he said sadly, "and the publicity of my life makes indulgence in romance impossible to it; but I should be less than a man if I did not feel for you the deepest, the most indignant sympathy. That your wound should have been dealt you by one of my kindred makes me feel it like a personal dishonour——"

He paused, and with a strong effort controlled, unuttered, words of greater tenderness and fuller confession.

"But I will tell you honestly," he added, after a pause, "that I regret and blame your actions. They will cost you dear, and you have not measured the price of them. There is much that is fine and even heroic in yours. But can you honestly say, dear, that you believe your father, were he standing here now, would tell you that you had done well or wisely?"

She was silent. She was too truthful to assert a belief which she could not entirely feel.

"You cannot; for he was a wise and good man. He knew that women are always their own enemies

when they follow the dictates of pride, and of pique, and of jealousy. Pardon me if these words seem unfeeling; they are inadequate to express the great wrong that you suffer from, but after all they are the only ones which can describe the impulses which you have acted on now."

"May there not be such things as outraged decency and delicacy and indignant honour?"

"Yes, no doubt; who could deny them? But feeling alone is the most dangerous of guides. It drowns us in deep waters while we think ourselves safe on dry land. You imagined you were sparing Guilderoy the comment of the world; on the contrary, the world blames him and blames you equally, and through you, where it would only have seen a mere passing difference, will now see a scandalous and unalterable offence."

"I cannot help it if his passions are so made that they do not last a year; if it is what he has not which always seems so much better than what he has. It is not my fault if he married me as he would buy a *cocotte* and tired of me as he would tire of her. I have released him as far as I can possibly release him until death takes me. I will not eat of his bread, or live under his roof. I will not wear a gown he paid for, nor a ring he purchased; even my marriage ring I threw down before him—he did not even see it—what did he care? He was only thinking of her; sighing for her because she had the wit to assume indifference to him!"

She spoke with violence and with vehement scorn; he had never seen her so strongly moved before, often

as he had had to soothe her indignation and persuade her into peace.

All that she had endured in silence since she had left Naples broke out in these the first words which she had been able to pour into the ear of any listener.

He stroked her hair tenderly as he might have touched the hair of a suffering child.

"Calm yourself, my dear," he said gently. "Many women suffer what you suffer now. Only believe me, the remedy you have chosen is one which will harass and deepen your wound and never heal it. You have called the world in as your physician. It is one which kills and does not cure."

"Perhaps it would be best that I should kill myself; I have thought of it often. But I always remember that my father thought suicide a cowardice. Sometimes I am inclined to do it, it would set him free. Perhaps he would think of me with kindness if I were dead."

"And are there none who would regret you more than that?" said Aubrey with a rebuke in his voice which he could not restrain.

"No; why should they? If I am nothing to him I am nothing to any one."

She spoke wearily, listlessly, thinking only of herself. Aubrey's heart beat quickly; he said nothing, and she did not look at his face.

There was long silence between them, filled only by the lulling noises of the sea.

"It is impossible that you can remain here!" he said abruptly at last. "You are too young, twenty years too young. You wish to stay the tongues of the

world; what can set them in full cry like such an act as this?"

"They will say I am cold and odd. They have said so very often before. That is the worst they can say—I have never heeded it."

"It is not the worst! They will attribute motives to you of which you do not dream."

"What motives?"

"My dear! when a woman does not live with her husband, society is always sure that she lives with some one else. You force me to be brutally sincere."

Her cheeks flushed; she raised her head with hauteur.

"My life is free to all his family to observe. There is no concealment in it. It is as plain to be seen as the white face of that cliff."

"That is the sublime madness of innocence! The more open, simple, and harmless it actually is, the more will the world be certain that it conceals a secret and an intrigue."

"That must be as it may. My own conscience is enough for me. And surely you forget; the world knows—it cannot choose but know—that Lord Guilderoy finds his happiness elsewhere."

"And the world, which is always ready to excuse the man and accuse the woman, will very possibly say that it is pardonable he should do so, because—who knows what devilry they will not say? Only of this you may be very sure, that they will never believe that a woman of your years voluntarily shuts herself in such solitude as this without consolation."

"They can believe what they please. If they place

the blame on me, not on him, I shall have done what my father always bade me do—bear his faults for him. I shall receive no one. It is impossible that calumny can invent anything, unless they find sin in the gulls of the air and suspicion in the rabbits of the moors.”

“They will find it even in these, doubt not, rather than find it nowhere.”

“They must do so then.”

“You are cruel and perverse.”

“I do not mean to be either. But I will not reside in any one of your cousin’s houses, nor will I touch any shilling of my dower from him. I am nothing to him. He is nothing to me. I only still keep his name because I cannot be relieved of it without publicity, nor even with publicity, I believe, as the laws of marriage stand.”

“No, you could not. And you would not free yourself if you could.”

“Why do you say so?”

“Because you always care for him. Some day you will pardon him, some day he will ask you to do so, and such forgiveness will be the renewal of affection.”

“Never!”

“Oh, my child! how long does a woman’s ‘never’ last? So long as the man whom she loves does not kneel at her feet, and no longer.”

The colour deepened in her face.

“What you say to me is an insult. I have no feeling for the lover of the Duchess Soría; or, if I have, I pray God night and day to tear it from my heart, for it is dishonour—abasement—ignominy! When I forget

it or forgive it, you may tear my heart out of my body and throw it to the hounds of Balfrons!"

"Do not make rash vows, my dear," said Aubrey gently. "Women forgive everything when they really love."

"No—no—not that!"

"Oh, yes, and far worse than that. What use is love if it be not one long pardon?"

"Then it is one long weakness!"

"Or one long and inexhaustible pity—one long and infinite strength."

There was a tone in his voice which soothed the passionate unrest and indignation of her soul. It seemed to her as though she heard her father's voice speaking by Aubrey's lips.

"You are good," she said wistfully. "I wish you had loved me and I you."

The words were as innocent as though a child had spoken them, but they tried the forbearance of the hearer of them with a cruel martyrdom.

He rose hastily, glanced at the dusky shadows of the declining day, and bade her a hurried farewell.

"You will come and see me often?" she asked him, as she held his hand in hers. He looked away from her.

"As often as I can, dear. You know I have so little time for my own affairs. You shall always know where I am, so that you may send to me in a moment if you need. Adieu. Believe me your firmest friend, even though I am no flatterer and do not pretend to approve you in what you now do. I will write often to you, and you will write to me. I hope that you will soon write to tell me that you renounce this cruel choice of life."

The calm and unimpassioned words cost him much in their utterance. He longed to offer her his life, his soul, his endless devotion, to put away all national needs and duties from him and cleave only to her, if he could comfort her or atone to her in any way; but he resisted the temptation and left her with kind and tranquil farewell. He knew that her heart was not his, he believed that it would never be his; he scorned to try to persuade her that indignation and revenge and loneliness and gratitude mingled together could ever make fair counterfeit of love. The lesson might be taught perhaps with time. A bruised heart is often like a wounded bird; it falls to the first hand which closes on it; but he thought that such affection would never be love in any sense, in any shape; he believed that all of love which would ever stir in her breast was now and would be ever given to the man who had abandoned her.

Other men, more easily contented and of less susceptible honour than he, might have endeavoured to supply the lost passion, to replace the perished joys; to persuade her that all she felt of bitterness and wrong could be most deeply and surely, and most thoroughly in kind, avenged by the acceptance of other sympathies and other affections than those which were denied her.

But Aubrey's were not the lips to utter these persuasions or these sophisms; nor would he, well as he loved her, have cared ever to accept the mere fruits of a tortured jealousy and humiliation, which in their sufferings might have imagined themselves love.

As he left Christslea he looked across the misty wintry wold, across to the horizon, where the brown woods, the shining roofs, and the many spires and

towers of Ladysrood were faintly visible on the grey clouded edge of the far moors.

Its master had left his fairest treasure unguarded and unremembered, thought Aubrey; if any bore it away from him whom could he blame but himself?

CHAPTER XX.

THE days and weeks and months drifted on; the chilly spring, the uncertain summer, the stormy autumn of an English year succeeded one another, and the dawn broke and the night fell over the lonely shore of Christslea, bringing no change in the monotony of Gladys' existence.

Guilderoy remained out of England. The world, with its usual discrimination, pitied him and blamed Aubrey.

"*Vox Fæminæ vox Dei*," and women without exception took part against Gladys whenever they now remembered her at all, which was but seldom. They were all of them certain that she could have been entirely happy with her husband had she chosen, since he was always so charming; it was her want of amiability and of tact, they agreed, which had caused his errors. No one with such exquisite manners as his could be otherwise than most easy to live with; ah! why had he thrown himself away on any one so utterly unsympathetic?

Here and there some man who had always admired her beauty, or who had reasons of his own for knowing

that Guilderoy was not a faithful husband or a constant lover, lifted up his voice in her defence; but such a one was always in a very narrow majority, and rallied few to his opinions.

Hilda Sunbury, moreover, had pronounced against her sister-in-law: that was quite enough to condemn her. She was not, indeed, at ease in her own conscience for having done so; but that society did not know. She was a woman of honesty of purpose and rectitude of character. She was aware that she had been the primary cause of the final separation between Guilderoy and his wife, and she was constantly haunted by Vernon's farewell words. But her dislike to the mistress of Ladysrood had been stronger than her candour or her justice; her prejudices for her family were stronger than her regard for pure truth. She had the power of swaying her world in favour of her brother to the injury of his wife, and she exercised the power, indifferent to the claims of innocence and right.

"I always knew you were an unsympathetic woman, but I never thought that you were an unscrupulous one until now," Aubrey said to her unsparingly in that London world which she was using all the force of her unimpeachable position and her distinguished virtue to turn against her brother's wife.

"I say what I believe," she replied, with chilly dignity and great untruth.

"Ask your God to forgive you for your thoughts, then," said Aubrey.

He felt all the disgust of a man who knows the innocence of a woman before the calumny of her by other women.

He knew that Hilda Sunbury in her soul was as fully aware of the purity of her brother's wife as he was; and her efforts to stain the whiteness of Gladys' name, that her brother's faults might be dealt with leniently by the world, seemed to him as dark a crime as any murder; almost worse than crime, because more cowardly, since secure from all punishment. He himself was powerless to avenge it. Any protest of his made the position of the one whom he desired to protect more questionable.

Almost every one believed that he was her lover: he felt that, though no hint of it could ever be given to him. He knew it by the silence of others about her to him and before him; he knew it by that instinct with which both men and women of sensitive temperament become conscious of the opinion of their society about them, even when it is most carefully hidden from them. He knew it by the unwillingness of his sister, once so warmly her friend, to speak at all of Gladys to him.

There is a silence around us at times upon the name dearest to us which tells us without words that others know that it is thus dear.

More than once he was tempted to write to or seek out Guilderoy; but he felt that by him, as by society at large, his interference on behalf of Gladys would be at once suspected and disregarded, might injure her greatly, and could do her no possible service.

And his wrath was so bitter against one who could remain absent, lulled in voluptuous pleasures, whilst her life was beating itself as painfully against its prison bars as any bird's, that he felt incapable of preserving any

measure in rebuke, or even insult, if he once allowed himself to address his cousin either by spoken or by written word. Any quarrel between them would become of necessity national property for public comment. Rank, like guilt, "hath pavilions but no privacy."

Meanwhile, despite all, she herself did not repent her choice. She would not, for all that the world could have given her, have continued to dwell in his house and spend his income. She would not at any price have borne the constant stare of wonder or the semi-smile of pity with which she would have been met in society by those whose spoken words would only have been of homage or of courtesy. Of all unendurable positions hers would have been the most painful, had she been living amongst his acquaintances and friends. Here at least she had such kind of tranquillity as solitude can afford. The fisher people on the shore asked her no questions; the bright bold eyes of the orchard birds had no cruel curiosity in them; and the unobtrusive councils written on the pages of the dead men of old had no inquisitiveness or censure underlying them as those of living speakers would have had. She was glad of such isolation, as all those who suffer from humiliation as well as from calamity are glad of it. But it seemed to her as if the whole world were dead, and she alone living in it.

All that stir and blaze and noise and change and pomp and pageantry of society, in which she had dwelt ever since her marriage, were all gone as though she had never known them. A silence like that of a tomb seemed always around her. The steep white cliffs which rose in a semicircle around Christslea were like the

walls of a dungeon. She heard nothing from the misty dawns until the starless nights, except the rolling up of the waves upon the sands, the cry of the owls flitting at dusk amongst the boughs, the distant shouts of the crews in the fishing cobbles out at sea, or the shrill weak voices of the old man and woman of the house garrulously quarrelling over their work in garden, kitchen, cellar, or apple-house.

Sometimes it seemed to her as if the years of her life with Guilderoy had been only the mere dream of a night. She felt material losses, too, which it humiliated her to acknowledge. The homely and simple ways of life at Christslea were irksome and barren to her. All which she had despised, whilst she had enjoyed them, of the beauty, the graces, and the luxuries of existence were now lacking to her, and she missed them with a continual sense of need of them which surprised and mortified her. She had believed herself wholly indifferent to those mere externals; those elegances and indulgences which in the imagined asceticism of her renunciation she had counted as wholly unnecessary to her. She missed them at every turn, at every moment; she realised how much they contributed to the ease and grace if not to the happiness of existence. Her father had voluntarily resigned them all, and no expression of regret for them had ever escaped his lips, and she had fancied that she could imitate his philosophy. But the youth and the sex in her had not either his resignation or his endurance; and she suffered from the mere physical and material deprivation of her solitude as he had never done, having attained the tranquillity of middle age and of a scholar's stoicism. She had over-

estimated her own strength, and underrated the power of memory and desire.

The little lonely house which had been the heaven of her childhood was the prison of her body and her spirit now. She had force of character enough to make her adhere to her decision, but she had not coldness of nature enough to make her at peace in it. She had known all the fullest joys of the passions, and all that the world could give of pleasure and of admiration. She could not resign herself to these empty, joyless, stupid, eventless hours which succeeded each other with eternal monotony as the lengths of grey worsted rolled off the ball with which the old housekeeper knitted hose from noon to night, by the hearth in winter and by the porch in summer.

It was in vain that she strove to find those consolations in study which her father had never failed to find; in vain that she opened the black-letter folios and the Latin volumes in which, as a child, she had thought it her dearest privilege to read; in vain that even in her father's own manuscripts she found nothing of wisdom although their precepts of patience were as true as those of Publius Syrus. In vain did she seek those calm and golden counsels; they fell cold as icy water on the heat and pain of her restless suffering. When she looked off from the written or the printed words she saw the face of her rival, and she heard the voice of her husband saying always, "She is the only woman whom I have ever loved. God help me!"

Often she pushed the books and papers aside, and went out in all weathers, when the white rain was driving in fury over the moors, and when the waves were

rising in a wall of foam to break in thunder on the beach.

Nothing hurt her. She returned home often drenched to the skin, but she took no harm. Great pain, like great happiness, often bestows an almost more than mortal immunity from all bodily ailments. "And I am always well!" she sometimes thought, almost in anger with nature for its too abundant gifts to her of health and strength.

"He will think I do not care," she said to herself bitterly, "because I do not die!"

She knew that, with a man's hasty and superficial judgment, he was very likely to think so if he thought of her at all.

From the summit of the moor which rose behind the house she could see Ladysrood in the far distance. On the rare days of sunshine the gilded vanes and the zinc roofs glittered in distant points of light above the woods. The great house was left to that silence and darkness which had been so often its portion in other years. Once or twice some of the old servants came to Christslea and begged to see her, for she was beloved by the household; but she did not encourage them to return. She had sent for her dogs, and for some of her books from there; that was all. She would not even have any of her clothes. With an exaggeration of feeling, which even to Aubrey seemed morbid and overstrained, she stripped herself of everything which had become hers by her union with Guilderoy, and wore the plainest and the cheapest apparel that she could find. But the beautiful and symmetrical lines of her form gave their own nobility to those humble

stuffs; and in her rough serge, white or black, she had no less distinction than she had had in her pearl-sown velvet train at a state ball.

The insincerities, the conventionalities, and the feigned friendships of society had always been painful and oppressive to her, even when she had been comparatively happy amongst them. In her present circumstances they would have been an intolerable torture. She had her father's sensitive horror of compassion and of comment, and if alone and wretched at Christslea she was at the least unmolested. Her retirement had been a nine days' wonder to her acquaintances; in a short time other mysteries, other scandals, other interests took its place: she was not there, others were. Society, with the indifference which follows its curiosity as surely as night follows day, ceased to speak of her, and almost forgot that she existed.

She had been left unopposed to abide by the choice she had made; and of her husband she heard nothing. He had passed out of her existence as utterly as though he lay in his grave like her father.

"If he were dead they would tell me," she thought: if he were dead they would remember, for a day at least, that she was his wife.

Unconsciously to herself, her selection of Christslea, amongst other reasons, had been actuated by the sense that there at least she would be sure to hear if any accident or illness befell him. She could not bring herself to ask for tidings of him even of Aubrey; but she knew that the lord of Ladysrood could have no great ill happen to him without such at once becoming the common talk of the whole country side. Day and night

she thought of him as she had last seen and heard him, passionately declaring to her his preference of her rival and his allegiance to her. Yet even in that moment he had seemed to her stronger, manlier, more worthy, than he had seemed to her before in the incessant duplicities and the half-hearted intrigues of his other and less open infidelities. At least there was on his lips no lie, and in his acts no subterfuge.

Even in the agony of the jealousy and the indignity which consumed her, she reached some faint perception of what her father had meant when he had bade her attain a love which could see as God saw, and pardon as men hope that their God pardons them. But it was only in brief, far separated, intervals that such perception came to her; for the most part she was devoured by those burning tortures of jealous imaginations which make every moment of existence almost insupportable to those they torment.

She recovered her bodily strength quickly; she had too perfect health for it to be easily overcome by any suffering of the mind or of the senses; the vigorous and abounding life which filled her veins became a cruel mockery of the weariness and barrenness of her empty days and her starved affections. When she had thought of Christslea as a haven of rest in which she could let her sick soul lie hidden in peace, she had remembered it as it had been with her father's presence filling it as with the benign and cheerful light of spiritual sunshine. She had forgotten that without him it could be only a lonely and dreary cottage like any other, a bald, poor, empty life, lived out face to face with eternal losses and eternal regrets.

What had been left her through her father was a trifle indeed; no more than one of the head servants of Ladysrood was paid a year; but it was enough for such few wants as her life here comprised, and the rental of the cottage she paid into the hands of the steward every three months.

"My lord does not permit me to receive it," said the steward, in infinite perplexity and distress.

"But I insist that you shall take it," she replied. "Pay it into the poor-box of Ladysrood parish church if you can do nothing else."

And it was paid to the poor accordingly. She would not owe to him one square inch of the soil in which the stocks and the sweet-briar grew. Everything that was not the gift of her father, or of Aubrey and his sister, she had left behind her; all her costly wardrobes, her furs, her laces, her fans, her pictures, her jewels of all sorts, remained in his houses where they were, locked up in their chests and cabinets and cases, and the keys were deposited with his men of business.

"You have acted as though you were guilty, and not he," Aubrey said to her again and again, remonstrating with what seemed to him exaggerated feeling.

"I could not have borne my life if I had kept any single thing of his," she answered, with an energy which was almost violence. "Everything he ever gave me is at Ladysrood, from my bridal pearls down to the last gift he bought for me."

"I do not deny that there is nobility and renunciation in your withdrawal into this obscurity and beggary," replied Aubrey, "but it is a mistake. It has

made a thing which the world need never have known become inevitably the world's talk. It may sound priggish, pretentious, or unfeeling perhaps, my dear, if I say so, but I have always held that people of our order have no right to gratify their own private vengeance, or even set themselves free from painful obligation, if by so doing they bring the name they represent upon the common tongues of the crowd. This is the sense of the old *noblesse oblige*. We do not belong only to ourselves. We are a part of the honour of our nations. When we do anything on the spur of personal passion or personal injury, which brings those whose name we bear into disrepute, we are faithless to our traditions and our trusts."

She sighed heavily, and the tears rolled off her lashes down her cheeks. She knew that he was right; no appeal to dignity and honour could leave untouched the inmost chords of the heart of John Vernon's daughter.

"I will never do anything to lower his name myself," she said, with emotion. "Never, let me suffer what I may."

"Of that I am sure," replied Aubrey; "but without thought you have done what must inevitably draw the comment and the censure of the world upon you both."

"Not I. It was not my fault, though I have taken all blame for it. He had left me openly for her; he had resolved to do so before I set foot in Naples."

"It need never have been known to the world in general if you had continued to be the mistress of his houses, and with time you might have regained his affections."

A hot blush of deepest anger scorched up the tears upon her cheeks. "I could not live like that; I would not exist a day in such hypocrisy and degradation."

"Why will you talk of death, my dear? you will outlive me and Guilderoy by many years. You are hardly more than a child still."

"And do not children die? It is true death never takes those who wish for it; and I am always well—cruelly well—absurdly well!"

"That is ungrateful to fate, my dear. Would you be happier if you were lying on a sick-bed, paralysed with bodily pains torturing you, as well as mental?"

"It would be a less harsh contrast. Oh, yes! I know that I am thankless, ungracious, wicked, I dare say; but when I feel such perfect health in me, such untiring strength, I wonder what are the use of them, why they stay with me, why they could not make my little children strong enough too, so that they might have lived. His sister always says it was my fault that they died. I do not think it was."

"Yes; I wish your children had lived. You would not have severed your life from his then?"

"Oh, yes, I should. I should have done just the same; only I should have had them with me. He would not have taken them away from me. I heard him say once that a man was a brute who could take her children from any woman, at any age, whatever the law might allow to him."

Aubrey looked at her in surprise.

"My dear, when you can recognise qualities and feelings in him like this, why did you not have more patience with him? Human nature cannot give un-

alloyed excellence, and human affections should not expect it. In what we love we are sure to find grave faults, and faults which often are of the kind which we of all others most disparage; but we must accept them just as we would accept blindness or lameness, or any physical accident in the person we loved."

"That depends on the character of the faults."

"Does it not rather depend on our own character? I admit that what is vile or utterly false and feeble will kill affection, because it destroys the very roots in which it is planted. But the infidelities of the passions and the waywardness of the instincts are not sins so dark as to be unpardonable; they are, indeed, faults almost inseparable from manhood."

She looked at him wistfully.

"You would be faithful to any woman you loved, I think?"

"There is no question of myself," said Aubrey impatiently. "I have had no time for the soft follies of life, and my mistress is England, who is a very exacting one. The question, under consideration now, is of my cousin. His offences against you are very grave; but they are of a kind which you must have learned enough in these years to know are inseparable from such a temperament as his, and which I think every woman should force herself to overlook."

"If she felt herself in the least loved by him or necessary to him, yes," she answered, with force and emotion. "All the question lies there. If he had ever loved me I might believe that he might care for me more or less again. But I knew—I knew almost at once—that he never did. As far as he can love at all

he loves her. I am nothing to him but a person who is in the way; who prevents him from marrying her; who encumbers his life and draws down unpleasant comments on him from the world. You cannot alter that. There is nothing to touch or to appeal to in it."

"I think that you mistake, that you exaggerate. Look in your mirror, and see if you are a woman to whom a man so susceptible to female charms as he is, can ever be wholly indifferent."

She smiled sadly, with that premature knowledge of the world which had so embittered her life with its disillusion.

"If I were a stranger or a mere acquaintance I should have charm for him perhaps. Surely, my friend, you must understand that, being what I am to him, I have none."

He looked at her again; they were walking by the edge of the cliff behind the house in one of the rare hours in which he permitted himself to visit her. It was a rough, rude day, with boisterous winds and a high sea tumbling black and frothy far down below them. The mists hung heavily over the inland landscape, and all the northern horizon, where the woods of Ladysrood were, was hidden by a white thick fog. But on the table-land of the cliffs the breeze was blowing strongly, and it gave warmth to her cheeks and brilliancy to her eyes, and blew some of the short waves of her hair in disorder upon her forehead. The wind, and the cold, and the air from the sea, lent her a vividness of colouring and of expression which for the moment banished the gloom and sadness which were now habitual on her face.

"If he could see her now," thought Aubrey, "surely he would come back to her."

He turned his own eyes from her and gazed out over the stormy sea, afraid of the emotions into which he might be hurried.

His position grew daily more and more difficult as sole counsellor and friend of the deserted wife of his own cousin; more and more painful to himself and invidious before others. Though passion had had little place in his life, his nature was far from passionless, and he realised that the time might come when it would be impossible to him longer to preserve this attitude of calm, paternal affection towards her.

With all the unconsciousness of a woman whose thoughts and feelings are centred elsewhere, she unwittingly tempted him and tortured him a hundred times an hour. The very pleasure with which she welcomed him; the sense she often expressed to him that he was her one consolation and protection, the instinct of confidence in which she turned to and leaned on him in her loneliness, appealed more than any other thing could have done to a man of his merciful and magnanimous temperament. But they also tried his self-control more cruelly than any other things, and often made him dread that his voluntarily accepted office would be one beyond his force.

All the public obligations and national interests with which his life was filled, although they gave him that hold on duty and on honour which it would have been a crime in his eyes to relax, his position before the country being the conspicuous one which it was,

they yet could not still in him either the rebellion of chained passions or the natural yearnings of the heart.

He was a man of higher principle and stronger force of self-denial than most; but he was also a man of warmer feeling than most, and his love had never been weakened by being divided and frittered away in such innumerable amours as had swayed in their turn the fancies of Guilderoy. All the grave and absorbing claims upon his life from his party and his country could not prevent his unspoken attachment to his cousin's wife growing daily and hourly in influence on him. But he had strength to keep it untold, for he felt that any expression of it would destroy the serenity of trust with which she looked to him in all things, and would alarm her, dismay her, and leave her utterly alone.

He was her only friend; for all others whom she knew had fallen from her. Her life was dreary and dangerous as it was. With none to whom she could show her aching heart, it would become to her, he knew, a solitude beyond the strength of any woman so young to endure. She herself had that oblivion of possible calumny and of the imputation of low motives which is at once the strength and the feebleness of noble natures, and leaves them exposed to the false constructions of those who, unheeded by them, observe them with malevolence and coarseness; such malevolence and such coarseness as are always the foundations of the superficial judgments of society. She did not think for a moment of any possible misconstruction of that kindly and honest affection which Aubrey had shown her ever since he had first met her in the little

Watteau cabinet at Guilderoy House the day after her first drawing-room. He had been always there to serve her in any difficulty, to counsel her in any distress; it was natural that he should come to her now in her solitude.

It seemed to her strange that he came so little; it seemed even unkind and unjust. She accused him in her thoughts of leaning to his cousin's side, of being so swayed by family considerations of pride and sympathy of kindred that he palliated and excused his cousin's conduct to an extent which was injustice to herself. Woman-like, she required in her friend unlimited approval and undivided sentiment; she wanted to hear him tell her that she had done wholly right, was wholly to be pitied and esteemed. The slightest reservation in sympathy struck on her aching heart as with the cold severity of censure.

It made him afraid for her sake to assume any prominence in her affairs or to take that part on her behalf with his cousin which it would have been his natural impulse to take. Neither Guilderoy nor the world would ever have credited him with the unselfish feelings which would have been his only motive power. He saw no way in which he could assist without more greatly injuring her. He knew, too, that it was likely enough they would associate his own name with the causes of her voluntary retirement; and he was conscious that every step he took, and every word he spoke in her protection or defence, would only create more strongly the impression that he in some way or another controlled her destinies.

Nor did he disguise from her that all his family

blamed her; even his sister blamed her. They were intolerant of a publicity and eccentricity which they could not conceal from society, and of which with more or less undisguised inquisitiveness the world around them wearied them incessantly for the explanation. They felt all the impatience of a proud and sensitive race at the needless wonder and conjecture which were aroused by her retirement to her father's cottage. It had caused a public scandal where the world need have known nothing of the differences between herself and her husband.

True, she herself knew that Guilderoy had left her never to return to her, and that such total separation from her had been the price put by her rival on her re-acceptance of his vows; but they did not know this, and, had they known it, would have thought it a mere delirium on his part which would pass away with time and with indulgence. They would have censured him strongly, but they would not have deemed her justified by his conduct in taking such a course as gave her name to the whole world to tear in pieces in the excitement of its curiosity and baffled interrogation. The view which Hilda Sunbury took of her action was in the main the view of all those powerful families with which Guilderoy was connected, whether closely or distantly, by blood or alliance. They defended him because he belonged to them; and they visited her with their displeasure because they thought, as his sister did, that she had been grossly at fault throughout, that she had never known how to obtain any influence over him, and that, having confirmed his faults by over-lenieny to them in the first years of their marriage, she had

now injured him by severity and severance when both were ill-timed and misunderstood.

Though often when she was alone the conscience of Hilda Sunbury smote her, remembering the last words which she had heard John Vernon speak to her, yet in society she did not hesitate to exculpate her brother at his wife's cost. She did not scruple to hint, with many adroit phrases, at incompatibility of temper, want of sympathy, coldness of feeling, which excused if they did not justify Guilderoy's indifference.

"I say nothing; I blame no one," she replied continually to her questioners; but there was a tone in the words which implied a more injurious censure than any direct accusation would have done.

And when Aubrey, angered and in earnest, told something of the truth, and took up the defence of his cousin's wife, society listened to him with apparent deference because he was a great person in more ways than one and a leader of opinion, both social and political; but, in his absence, smiled and said that he had always been her friend, always been conspicuously attendant on her from the earliest days of her appearance in the world. Without the voices of the women of his House raised on her behalf, he could do but little in her service; and they, at their friendliest, thought of her as the Duchess of Longleat did, who said one day to him:

"If she would come and stay with me, if she would hold her own at Ladysrood, if she would lead any natural life so that the world need not talk, I would support her in every way. But as long as she buries herself in this ridiculous isolation, as long as she vir-

tually blames herself by her acceptance of an utterly invidious position, I can do nothing for her even if I wished. You say that Guilderoy leaves her; it may be so; but to all appearance it is she who leaves him. You say that she has voluntarily given up her place in his life and all her rights; I do not doubt you, but there is certainly every appearance that it is he who has refused them to her for some just cause: I say just because, were it unjust, she would most certainly protest. I have always been attached to her; first because she pleased you, and then because she pleased me myself; but she has placed herself in an absurdly false position, even accepting your account of the causes which have led to it, and I do not see what any one can possibly do to sustain her in it."

"I thought you more generous and less conventional," said Aubrey, angered deeply, "and I think that when I give you my word that her conduct has not only been blameless but admirable, you might trust me enough to believe in my assurance."

"My dear, I do not doubt that you give it in perfect good faith," said his sister. "Who could doubt your good faith who knows you? But you have always been infatuated about her—pardon me the word—and I confess that I think your chivalry is doing her, in her present position, infinitely more harm than good. If she will come and stay with me I will receive her. What more can I say? I have always been greatly her friend. But so long as she condemns herself in society's opinion by living alone in a little cottage where she is only visible to you, no one can be of any solid service to her. You say that Evelyn is living openly with the

Duchess Sorìa. It may be so. But the world does not believe it, because the Duchess Sorìa is a woman wise enough always to please and pamper the world; and even if it be ever generally known, every one will declare that Lady Guilderoy could have only one or two courses open to her—either to carry her case to the tribunals, which is what vulgar women do, or else to go on her usual routine as if she saw nothing and heard nothing, which is what women who are gentlewomen do all their lives long.”

“It is what she is doing.”

“No; what she is doing is a romantic, headstrong, idiotic thing with which you have great sympathy, but with which no one else living will ever have the slightest patience. She is drawing the whole world’s attention down upon her, and no woman can ever do that without being condemned by it. When the season comes, and she is not in her house in town, not in her place at Court, not in her position in society, not in her home of Ladysrood, and every one knows that she is living alone in the cottage her father died in, what do you suppose that society in general will say?”

“If it can ever say the truth by any miracle, it will say that she is so living because she is too sensitive and too proud to accept the maintenance of a man who is unfaithful to her without secrecy or excuse.”

“No; the world will say nothing of the sort, for it does not believe in miracles. It will take the side which is popular; it always takes the side which is popular, and you know it does; it will exonerate Guilderoy, because it has never liked her; and, being essentially vulgar, which all society is in our day, it

will utterly refuse to credit that any woman voluntarily surrenders all the material pleasures of a great income and a great position. When all our maidens are brought up only to think life worth living if they can sell themselves for those, who will be likely to hear with patience that Gladys alone of her sex despises them? You know, as well as I do, that though you proclaimed it in Westminster Hall with sound of trumpets, you would not find any living creature to believe you."

"I supposed that *you* would believe me," said Aubrey with great anger and some emotion.

Ermyntrude Longleat looked at him with tenderness and anxiety.

"I have not said that I do not, my dearest. But I know her intimately, and I know that her education has given her that unworldliness and unwisdom which always appear either a crime or a lunacy to the world at large. I believe her motives to be what you say; but I think the act they have resulted in is deplorable. It must make the breach between her and Guilderoy irrevocable. You seem to me to remember that too little. You forget that after all we are his relatives, not hers; and in my opinion her first obligation was to him, not to her own pride. You would see this as I see it if your feelings were not biassed by strong personal interest in her which blinds you to common facts. Forgive me, dear, if I have said too much."

"It is precisely because we are his relatives, not hers, that common justice and common honour call on us to defend her against him," said Aubrey, passing over her latter words. "Guilderoy requires neither pity nor support; he does what he pleases; he would always

do what he pleased if the whole world were burning. He leaves his wife much as he would any *cocotte*. He offers a different price, it is true. He has told his lawyers to give her half his income. But the feeling which governs him is the same as if he were paying off a woman he wanted no more. He deems himself *quitte par la bourse*."

"And she refuses?"

"She refuses. She will live on the little her father left her. I confess I am amazed that such a choice in so young a woman does not move you to admiration."

"I cannot admire what is making the whole of society talk ill of a person who is related to me."

"You speak as if he were blameless."

"No; but if every woman in our world made such an *esclandre* as she, society would be at an end."

"She has made none. She has simply withdrawn herself to the life that she led before marriage."

"And, pray, what is that but a public separation?"

"It is a separation certainly, but not a public one. It would be utterly ignoble if, because we are closely connected with him, we upheld him against a wholly innocent woman. She may not have acted judiciously, but she has most certainly acted as only a wholly innocent woman would act; and she is as entirely sacrificed to him as if he had killed her in the flesh as he has in the spirit."

His sister listened to him with sorrow and apprehension.

"I hope to heaven you will not be sacrificed to her in turn!" she thought, but she forebore to say it.

Aubrey was disappointed and angered at her want

of sympathy, and took his leave of her, failing for the first time in their lives to influence her by his opinions and his desires.

Knowing the world profoundly as he did, he divined all that the world was saying of Gladys, not in his hearing indeed, nor in that of any member of his family, but nevertheless saying unsparingly, inevitably, with all its inexhaustible powers of exaggeration and invention. Who beside himself and the few who knew her intimately would believe in the story as she told it, in the motives as she gave them?

When her position was a target for the arrows of slander, how could she escape them? Who would believe in the pride and indignation of a character, still so childlike in its impulses and so unworldly in its estimates, that it could avenge its wrongs by stripping itself of every material advantage and every pleasure and pomp of life?

Her choice was one of those things which the world will to the day of judgment utterly refuse to credit, because, breaking all its canons and ignoring all its estimates, they afford to it no kind of common ground on which their motives can be judged.

Aubrey knew that; and he knew that it would be as likely a task to persuade geese hissing on a common of the beauty of a sunrise as to induce the mass of society to give credence to the reasons which had led her to return to the house at Christslea.

It was an exaggerated sentiment, and when some idea of what she had done was bruited about in society it was called morbid and mad by the few who did not go still farther and say that she had been forced to do

it by her husband on the discovery of her attachment to his cousin. It was an unwise act; unwise with that mingling of sublimity and folly which characterises most acts of any strong feeling. She seemed by it to give colour and ground to the conjectures raised against her; it was an error which none but a very young and a very proud woman would have made.

The money which her father had inherited, and which had come in due course to her, Guilderoy had immediately secured to her in such a manner that it was her own as absolutely as if she had never married. Under her marriage settlements her father had been her only trustee; and his sudden death had left her sole mistress of her actions. Vernon had never felt the least anxiety as to her safety in her husband's hands with regard to all material welfare. Guilderoy was at all times not only generous but scrupulous in the observance of all obligations of that kind, and had never had the slightest disorder in his personal affairs. What he had once promised in the little study at Christslea on this point he had thoroughly and blamelessly fulfilled. She was, therefore, so placed now that no one except himself could have any legal title to interfere in her actions, and he did not seek to interfere.

It angered him deeply, it oppressed and humiliated him, to know that his wife was living on her own resources in a little cottage ten miles off his own country house. He was well aware of how the whole world of acquaintances would speak of so strange a thing, and of how many and how strained would be the constructions placed upon it. But he did not endeavour to prevent it. He felt that he had wronged

her too much to have any mortal right to dictate to her. It seemed to him that only a cur could exercise the power given him by the law when he had voluntarily declined the power given him by the affections. To attempt to dictate to his wife when he had abandoned her would have appeared to him the very basest depth of low breeding.

Her choice embarrassed and pained him; it made him feel forsworn in all the promises which he had given to provide for her material welfare; it rendered the memory of John Vernon doubly reproachful to him. He knew that it must emphasise and darken his own acts in the sight of his relatives and his society in general. To a man like him, who was always careful to atone for moral unkindness to women by great care for their material welfare, and who looked on them as beautiful and delicate animals which needed luxury and shelter as racers did, it was intensely distressing to think that the woman whom he had made the bearer of his name should be living in a manner which to him seemed scarcely above penury. His pride was hurt by it; both his pride of place and that higher kind of pride which goes with all the sentiments of a gentleman. He never dreamed that the world would blame her, as it did do, instead of himself, and he felt that he must appear in its sight a brute who not only wronged but defrauded his wife. He was very far from imagining that the capriciousness of society would transfer all its blame from him to her. Knowing the world as he did, such inversion of it never occurred to him as possible.

But Gladys had never had the favour of her world.

All her courtesies, her generousities, her many thoughtful and tender-hearted acts had failed to atone for the unconscious hauteur of her manner and the tacit rebuke which her silence was to the amusements around her. She had had at all times as her enemies the many women who had loved and had lost Guilderoy, and their voices in the earliest days of her début had set the current of feeling against her.

Rumour excused his weaknesses and distorted her failings. The Duchess Soria was beloved and followed by the great world. It had never condemned, it would always be very slow to condemn, her. It would unquestionably hesitate to see anything harmful in any of her friendships; and it would as certainly refuse to believe that any woman of years so youthful as those of Gladys would voluntarily and innocently retire into the poverty of a rural and obscure life.

The world has its own reasons for believing and for disbelieving; the facts of any case do not enter into these, nor in any way affect them. There are those who can do no wrong in its sight, and these have a charter of infallibility; there are others who can do nothing to its taste, and these are condemned even before they act.

Then not a few also were envious of what was considered her monopoly of such a man as Aubrey. His great position and reputation made him the desire and the despair of many; and when it was seen how much time he could find to give to his cousin's young wife, though for no other dalliance of the sort had he leisure, there had never been wanting those who were ready to suggest that his attentions to Lady Guilderoy had as

their ultimate object something much less innocent than the mere pleasantness of family regard.

The proud and the delicate disdain the favour of the world, but they pay heavily for their disdain. The favour of the world makes us walk on the sunny side of the street, gives us a south aspect to our house of life, sweeps the dust and the mud from the paths we tread, and when we set sail from any port sends us favouring winds and smiling seas. She had never had that pliability and popularity which gives a woman in a difficult position the support of a thousand friends who make common cause with her. That rare high-breeding and that delicate hauteur which had marked her actions and her manner in the world had made her many enemies. There were few other women in European society who would not be gratified to think that proud young head was humbled. He could hear, as though he were present at them, the million and one different conversations in which the fact of her separation from her husband would be discussed, accounted for, embroidered on, censured, and ridiculed, all by turns.

No one wrote to her or came to her except her one friend.

The world will always let any one fall out of its favour who chooses to do so. She had made none of those intimacies with women which give a woman sympathy and support. She had been disdainful of the society of her own sex; to her mind, used to communion with such intelligences as her father's and Aubrey's, feminine conversation and confidences seemed trivial and frivolous. Men who had admired her

despite her coldness, and would gladly have atoned to her for her husband's neglect had she given them the slightest sign of permission, were afraid to seek her out in her solitude because of the generally credited report that Aubrey was primarily responsible for her selection of it. He was not a man with whom other men cared to meddle. The very coldness and indifference to women of his life hitherto made it generally supposed that his dedication of himself to his cousin's wife argued some deep mutual attraction which would not brook any interference.

It was altogether in vain that he in real truth saw her seldom, was careful to do nothing which could give grounds for calumny, and made his visits to her of brief duration. The world only saw in such scrupulous care the secrecy and the consciousness of a concealed intrigue which his public career made it necessary to conduct with the most delicate observance of appearances. "It is nothing new; he was always in love with her," said men and women both; and it seemed to them all as clear as daylight that it was the origin of Guilderoy's abandonment of her. He had discovered what he did not choose to condone, no doubt, and so had exiled her to her father's house in preference to seeking any more public remedy. He and Aubrey were near relatives. Their families were proud. Of course the matter had been arranged thus for the sake of peace and of the avoidance of the country's disapprobation; the attitude of Lady Sunbury and her ominous silence made them certain that this was the truth of the whole position. They blamed Aubrey more than they blamed Guilderoy.

The latter had always been frankly a man of pleasure, *un homme léger*; he had never assumed any serious attitude before the nation. But Aubrey was a politician of distinction and of immense influence; that he should cause any scandal of the sort seemed an offence against the country itself; a kind of immorality which was almost a treachery to it. "And his cousin's wife, too!" they cried, "and a woman so young!" All the great ladies who had had histories in their own lives, and all the fashionable *femmes tarées* who kept their footing with difficulty in society, were so shocked that they could not bring themselves to speak of it. And a Scotch waiting-woman who had taken service with a Scotch marchioness of very strict religious opinions sighed and hinted that she had left Lady Guilderoy's service because even at that time Lord Aubrey had been more intimate in his cousin's house than her principles had permitted her to countenance. "I am a poor woman who work for my bread, my lady," said the good creature, "and I have five small children dependent on my earnings; but let me suffer what I might, I could never consent to prosper by taking the wages of sin."

"Your feelings and your scruples do you very great honour," said her employer, who was of a different political party to that of which Aubrey was a leader.

And little by little the impression grew into a certainty with the world that Guilderoy, however blamable, had had much cause to blame others, and to leave the country.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE delicately good taste of Beatrice Soria had made it easy for the high society of Europe to see nothing, if it chose to see nothing, blamable in the renewed intimacy between her and Guilderoy. Theirs was one of those positions, they are not rare, in which the popularity or unpopularity of the persons concerned wholly determines the amount of indulgence or of censure which they shall receive from others. Tact goes for much in this, and distinction for much. The great lady does unblamed what the woman of yesterday would be stoned for attempting. There is a sublime nonchalance and a calm superiority to calumny which repel it utterly, much more effectually than any mere virtue. The world but asks from us external observances; if we do not give these, we are such fools that we merit that sentence of banishment from it which is as terrible as the fiat of exile to Ovid. Beatrice Soria had always been heedful to give those observances, not from want of courage, for she had great courage, but from good breeding. It seemed to her vulgar to put out your passions in the street, as the poor hang their soiled linen. It is enough for you to know your own happiness; you do not want the crowd to see the rose hung above your portal.

She had made it her condition that he should now leave his wife utterly for her sake, because it seemed to

her that nothing less than that could atone to her for his abandonment of herself, could reconcile her to her own lost dignity, or ensure her against a merely partial offering of his life such as would have seemed to her at once an insolence and a humiliation. "I alone, or nothing!" she had said, as every woman says it, although so few have power to enforce it. It had been the only means by which she had been able to test the sincerity of his regret and the loyalty of his return.

True, she had sacrificed to it an innocent woman; but it was only natural that the fulness of her own triumph had weighed more with her than any memory of her rival's misery. Like all great conquerors, she felt that it was not for her to heed or to pause for the fallen.

She was in no way a cruel woman, but she felt the contempt felt by all women who have great dominion over men for those who cannot attain equal power over them.

"She has loveliness, and youth, and many rare qualities of both heart and mind, and yet she can only sigh and suffer because he is faithless!" she had often thought with wondering disdain of Gladys as she had studied her in society.

She allowed nothing in their apparent intercourse which could give rise to any scandal, except such as must be inevitably caused by his continued residence in Italy. She made him live in his own houses, visit her with precaution, and never publicly presume upon his relations to her. It was her wisdom as well as her good taste which influenced her. She knew the truth that

Dulci ferimur: succo renovamur amaro;

and she did not allow their intimacy to be degraded into a too facile habit which would inevitably have become with time careless and over-sure.

She knew his nature and the temperament of men too well to allow him that too constant access to happiness which soon results in making such happiness insipid and unenjoyed. All the faults which had cost her so dear in her first association with him she avoided now; and even still at times he was so doubtful of his influence over her, despite all the proofs he had of it, that he asked himself uneasily whether his surrender to her had not been demanded by her rather through pride than love. It was the uncertainty, the stimulant, the mortification, which were needful to sustain at its strength the passion of a man whose conquests had been as easy as his caprices, and had been short-lived.

"Even now I do not believe that you love me as you used to do!" he said to her more than once.

She smiled. "What is love?" she said dreamily. "Sometimes I think it is the most absurd and the basest feeling of our lives; and sometimes I think it is the only spark of immortality which we ever have in us."

"It seems to me immortal when I look on you," he answered; and he was sincere in what he said.

All these months had passed with him in a happiness which had been more nearly the ideal happiness of his early dreams than any he had ever known. His re-conquest of her glorious physical beauty and the potent and subtle charm of her intelligence exercised a sway over him which was deeper and more enduring than the first passion which she had excited in him.

The amorous spell which lies in the climate of the country which had always been the land of his preference, and the easy languor of life in it, added to the spell of her influences upon him. He marvelled how ever he could have been mad enough to leave her; he wondered how he had passed years of his existence without her. Either warned by her previous loss of him, or calmed by the greatness and completeness of her triumph, or perchance bringing now into her relations with him as much of wisdom as she had once brought of passion, she gave him all the loveliness of love without its exactions and its violence. She bent all the varied resources of her mind, which were infinite, and all the powers of her seductions, which were endless, to prove to him all that he had missed in missing her, all which no other woman on earth could give to him; and she succeeded. She succeeded, now that it was a matter with her rather of supremacy, and pride, and triumph, than of love, where she had failed when it had been to her a thing of life and of death, on which all her soul had been cast. Passion serves women ill: it makes their eyes blind, their steps rash, their acts unwise; and unselfishness in love serves them still worse. Desire of dominion, on the contrary, is their most safe and subtle servant, placing illimitable power in their hands, and leaving their sight clear to use it in their own interest as they will.

Beatrice Sorìa had been a better woman when he had thought her a worse one, a tenderer woman when he had thought her a more violent one; her heart still beat for him, but no more with the rash, ardent, delirious warmth of earlier days. Dominant over her

impulses of revived passion was a colder and more egotistic intent to make him and to keep him once more wholly hers.

In the autumn of the year, Guilderoy was for a while in Venice, nominally living at his own palazzino there, whilst she was at one of the villas on the Brenta, which she had inherited as part of her mother's dower; one of those marvels of art and architecture which stand amidst the gladiolus-filled marshes and the green mulberry-shaded pastures of the Veneto, so little known, so rarely visited, but as much memorials of the greatness and luxury of the Venetian patricians as are the streets of the city herself. In early autumn, when the rose and white pomea is in flower in all the hedges, and the last aftermath is mown in the meadows, and the barges come down the river laden with purple and yellow grapes, and the marvellous sunsets burn over the wide-spreading waters, and the little grey owls flit under the poplar shadows, these villas on the Brenta form as lovely a retreat as the world can offer; and the gaiety and the pageantry of Goldoni and of Carpaccio seem to be renewed, and the lovely ladies and the gay gallants of Rosalba and of Longhi seem to live again in them.

For the most part they are, unhappily, abandoned to neglect, decay, and silence; but in hers the animation, the brilliancy, and the courtliness which her society brought thither were worthy of the traditions of Catarina Cornaro, the adored and adorable, who once had held her court there.

Guilderoy was little in the city, much at the villa,

and the days were long and light and sensuous and soft as the music of Grétry, which had used to echo over those waters and down those marble colonnades in the days of Madama Cattina.

One of the most potent seductions of Beatrice Sorìa lay in the forms of life with which she surrounded herself. The atmosphere in which a woman lives stimulates, or kills, love for her as much as does her person or her mind. Even one who is not beautiful derives a certain reflection of beauty from beautiful surroundings; and where she has ever about her pleasure, grace, and gaiety, she will have in them strong auxiliaries to charm and retain those whom she desires to please. The varied and brilliant existence which she created by her magnificent modes of living, and her unusual wit, made her houses wholly unlike any other. "You alone know how to live!" some one said to her once; and she thought sadly, "Yes; I know how to live; it is much, no doubt. But how to exorcise that spirit of dissatisfaction which dulls all sooner or later would be more—how—how? It has perplexed and baffled every voluptuary and every artist since the world began!" She interrogated in vain the shades of the great pleasure-seekers and the glad lovers who had passed down those marble staircases and under those canopies of trellised vine before her, in the days that were dead,

Sulle rive d'Adria bella.

Men had always been her playthings; she had done whatever she had chosen with them; but she always felt for them that indolent, indulgent, and yet at times impatient derision with which a woman of high in-

telligence and profound passions is apt to regard both her lovers and her friends.

And in her, now, besides this, was a vague, slight, very vague, very slight, sense of disappointment.

Was it because she failed to feel those intensities of emotion which she had felt before? Was it because no one summer is like another? Was it because the mind and nature change with time, and what is delightful and exquisite in one season cannot wholly content them in another? Or was it because the passions are such subtle, self-willed, and mysterious agents of our being that they resist the appeal to them to build in last year's nests? She could not tell; all the penetration and intuition of her intelligence and experience did not suffice to explain to her why this vague, faint sense of disappointment followed on the renewal of her romance.

It was no fault of his.

He was the most devoted and the most tender of lovers. It was perhaps that her memory and her imagination had expected more than it was humanly possible for any love to give from their reunion; or perhaps she unconsciously missed the stimulant of that desire to regain his affections which had moved all her strongest feelings since his marriage. She had nothing more left to wish for; in the full, rich, and pampered life of Beatrice Sorìa that fact was almost a loss in itself. She felt for him tenderly and with warmth indeed; but it was not the same feeling as had subjugated all her soul and her senses in the first days of its ascendancy.

"Perhaps I grow old, and so indifferent," she

thought; but then she looked in her mirror and smiled, and knew that it was not that.

Was it then the inevitable reaction of expectations too great for finite human passions to fulfil them? Was it that the lost music had seemed so sweet in its remembrance that no strain of it, heard now, could ever seem to equal it in melody? "I loved him better when he was not mine," she thought sometimes with the saddest consciousness which can ever visit love. Alas! it is not an unfrequent visitant.

Coming down the Grand canal one early forenoon, when the pressure of gondolas there was greater than usual owing to some Church festival, his own was jostled between the others and had to pause in its outward voyage while the rival rowers exchanged the usual maledictions with uplifted oars and infinite variety of florid oaths. He heard his own name spoken by one of two men who were sketching in a gondola tied to one of the piles before a water-gate. They were making drawings of all that is left of the Falier palace, and of its little garden court and wooden wicket; they were painters well known in the artistic world of London, and they recognised him as he passed.

"Where is his wife, do you know?" said one of them. "She was a lovely creature. You remember Leighton's portrait of her three years ago."

"She is always living alone in a little house on the sea-coast, I believe," replied the other.

"Separated, then?"

"Yes, virtually. Lord Aubrey consoles her, I believe. Some people say that he always did."

"Aubrey? The Minister?"

"The man who was Minister in the last Administration, yes. There is only one. He is this man's cousin."

"The relationship gave him opportunities, I suppose?"

The other artist laughed; and they both went on with their drawing of the little acacia-tree by the green gate of the court of the Falieri.

Guilderoy felt a strange emotion as his gondola, extricated, passed on its way towards the Lido. There was no truth, he knew, in this foolish gossiping; and yet it wounded, offended, and irritated him.

As the vessel passed outward on its way towards the lagoon he, lying back on his black cushions, could not shake off the rough unpleasant impression of the words which he had overheard. Was this how they were talking of him in England? Such a possibility had never come before his thoughts before.

He had actually and morally set his wife as free as though his death had released her from him. He did not believe that Aubrey had as yet become her lover, but he suddenly realised that it was a possibility which was more than possible. It did not find him indifferent. It touched that sensitive nerve in him which men call honour for want of a clearer name for it, though it is in truth rather personal pride and love of dignity than honour.

It suddenly awakened the image of Gladys from that dim forgotten past into which it had retreated, and restored her to a place, not in his heart indeed, but in his memories and in his susceptibilities.

She had seemed to him scarcely more than a shade

as she had last appeared before him in the ghastly and pallid hues of the dreamlike chambers of his Neapolitan palace, an avenging shape arisen to reproach him and to curse him; but now she became more than this; he realised that she was a living woman of breathing life and motion, who had it in her power, if she chose, to return him the harm that he had done to her by a vengeance which would touch him to the quick and humble him in the eyes of all men.

And why should she not do it? If she did, could he honestly blame her?

He knew he could not.

Why should he demand from a young and lonely woman a force of self-control of which his own strength and manhood had been incapable? The consciousness oppressed and haunted him with a vague dread. He remembered the warning Aubrey had given him, *Nil Helena peccat*. Had his cousin meant to give him in it a personal and not a general advertisement of impending possible ill? Had Aubrey, with his habitual candour, meant to say to him, "What you do not care to guard I shall consider that I am at liberty to approach as I may choose." He knew the loyalty and frankness of his cousin's character; it would, he knew, be very like him that on the eve of a prohibited attachment he should frankly endeavour to warn and place on his defence the man whose honour would be involved.

It was a beautiful afternoon as his boatmen took him, a few hours later, up the Brenta water, through the sparkling sunshine. The leaves were yellow on the poplars, and the trees looked made of gold. The wide green meadows were bathed in light. The thatch-roofs

of the cottages looked like the brown nests of big birds amongst the ever-flowering foliage. Huge barges and flat-bottomed boats, with painted sails leaning motionless on the lazy air, passed him laden with grapes and gourds, amber pears and rosy-cheeked apples. The far hills were sweet and fair with all the colours of the opal and the amethyst in them. But the beauty of the scene was lost on him.

He was thinking ever of the *Nil Helena peccat*.

When he reached the water-stairs of the villa, with steps of marble shelving down into the bulrushes and yellowing water-lily leaves, the day had grown dark. It was the hour of reunion in the great central hall, with columns and sculptures of Sansovino and a domed ceiling, where frescoes of Tiepolo's were lost in the immense height of the vault. Its owner was accustomed to gather her guests about her there before dinner in the autumn evenings, when the great olive and oak logs burning on the enormous hearth under its porphyry caryatides had a welcome warmth as the cold vapours of night succeeded to the warm sunshine of the past day.

He felt out of mood for that gay circle; for once, when he had changed his clothes and joined it, the brilliant gathering, where the men had the wit of Carlo Gozzi and the women the beauty of Teresa Venier, jarred upon him in its brilliancy and mirth.

"You have taken a chill on the water," some one said to him; he answered absently, "No—yes—perhaps."

Much later in the evening Beatrice Soria herself noticed his preoccupation.

"You have heard something which displeases you of your wife," she mused, for her quick intuitions let her read the souls of men, even in their secrecies, like open books.

She had taken means to inform herself of the manner in which Gladys had chosen to live, though her name had never once been mentioned between them.

To Beatrice Soria she was a woman beaten, forsaken, indifferent, insignificant; she pitied her and never spoke of her. But, she mused, it was so like a man because he had deserted her to think of her, even to think of her regretfully! Men were such children; such weak, wayward, fearful children, as she had said once on the banks of the Thames to Aubrey: always wanting that which they have not, always regretting their own actions when it is too late to efface them, always putting the blame upon fate which is due to their own folly, caprice, or instability!

The excuse is always "The woman tempted me and I did eat" in the wilderness of the world as in the Garden of Eden.

"You are ill at ease and out of spirits," she said as she passed him. "Do not look so; people will say that I tyrannise over you; nothing is more absurd than that."

"I cannot tutor my looks," he answered with impatience. "Perhaps I am not well. I do not know."

They were unobserved for a moment, others were dancing. He looked at her with an imploring gaze.

"You do love me?" he added. "Tell me again."

"What a child you are!" she said with a smile.

"What is the use of saying what is proved?"

"But is it proved?"

"What can you possibly mean?"

"I mean, in this gorgeous life of yours, flattered, amused, and adored as you are, what room is there for any great or exclusive feelings?"

"It seems to me, my friend, that it is very late for that doubt to come to you?"

"Perhaps I am jealous. You have so many who love you, and you are too indulgent with them."

"Do not become Othello because we are in the Veneto. It will not suit you in any way. Your love has always been *galanterie*."

"Not always."

"Yes, always, I think, at heart."

"That is cruelly unjust! What greater evidence——"
Coldness and anger come into her eyes.

"Do not remind me of your sacrifices. It is very bad taste."

"Sacrifices! Who spoke of sacrifices? I simply meant, what more could any man do than I have done?"

"I do not know, my dear, that it was so very much that you did. You were tired of your English life; what we are tired of, it does not cost much to renounce, and some people do say that it was rather your wife who renounced you, than you your wife."

"That is utterly untrue!"

"It may be," said Beatrice Soria with a gesture of entire indifference. "I suppose you quarrelled. We will not quarrel, my dear; it is the sorriest and the meanest grave that love can ever find."

She passed her hand lightly over his hair as she spoke, with something which was compassionate and mournful in the lingering caress.

"Now go and join those dancers and look happy. I cannot have my people think I make you otherwise than happy. In truth, you will never be happy very long, for you are life's spoilt child."

He kissed with passionate fervour the whiteness of her arm as it was near his lips.

"You have made me as happy as a god this whole long year!"

"Then it should seem a very short year to you!" she said with her slow sweet smile, and left him to join her guests.

His eyes followed her with worship. Alone for her had he ever approached that strength and constancy of passion which is the love of the poets. It was foreign to his temperament, and ill akin to all his inconstant habits, but it had been illumined in him for her. A vague and painful sense perpetually haunted him that though he again possessed her he did not again possess her soul, that though he had renewed his position towards her, he was powerless to regain over her that vital ascendancy which he had once owned and had wantonly thrown away; and this doubt increased the influence she had upon him by the perpetual consciousness which he felt of uncertainty and inequality.

When he had had power to make her absolute wretchedness, to be her arbiter of fate, to cause her tortures by a day's absence, by a month's silence, by a slighting word or by a careless homage taken elsewhere, he had been indifferent to his power and often also too indifferent to her pain. But now their positions were reversed; he did not feel for an instant that he was vitally necessary

to her; he did feel that she was life and death to him and mistress in the uttermost sense of all his fate.

CHAPTER XXII.

A FEW days later Guilderoy sent to one of his men of business to come to Venice. There was an intricate question pending in England affecting some leases on one of his estates which afforded reason enough to summon his land-agent to a personal conference. When the matter had been discussed in its financial and legal aspects, he inquired as carelessly as he could:

"And what of Lady Guilderoy? Is she well? Is she always living in the house her father had at Christslea?"

His agent answered in the affirmative, feeling on his own part considerable embarrassment, for this separation into which the law did not enter, this unexplained and unregulated severance, was little understood by any of his people.

"And does she keep herself wholly withdrawn from the world?" he added. "Does she see no one? I regret it if it is so; she is too young for such solitude."

"She sees no one," said the man of business, more and more in doubt as to what answers he should make. "At least Lord Aubrey comes sometimes, as no doubt your lordship knows."

Guilderoy's face flushed. "Yes, I have asked him to do so," he said quickly.

It was a falsehood, but it was an instinctive one to save her from suspicion.

He inquired no more.

The agent returned home with a doubt which had not before visited him that Lady Guilderoy was not so wholly innocent as she looked.

"After all," thought the man, "she keeps him out of England, so it is she who must be to blame, there can be no doubt of that."

Guilderoy had told Aubrey himself that it was a pity that he had not married her, and he had thought so honestly. They would have been perfectly sympathetic one to another. Yet the knowledge that these sympathies which were between them had now full leisure and free scope to be developed and indulged in any way they chose, in the absolute loneliness of Christslea, was detestable to him. After all, he thought, he could not refuse her the liberty which he had himself taken. It would have seemed to him mean and unworthy to enjoy a freedom for himself which he did not accord to her. He had the large morality, or immorality, of a man of the world; if she could console herself in any way for the disorder and desolation which he had brought into her life, he would be a brute to grudge it to her. So he reasoned.

He had put her out of his own existence; he could not complain if she made a separate life for herself. And yet the idea of his cousin alone with her in those little quiet rooms of Christslea was disagreeable to him. She had said that she would always respect the honour of his name, but those were only words, though they might have been words sincerely meant when they were

spoken. He knew that the heart of any woman once seriously involved will force her to abandon her strongest principles as the warmth of summer forces the willow and the sycamore to drop their spring-time catkins. And he thought of her more than he had ever done before.

She had grown very vague to him. His memory had but seldom reverted to her. He possessed the happy faculty of being able to dismiss from his mind what he did not wish to think of; and the coldness, the harshness, and the scorn with which she had spoken to him in their last interview had hardened his heart utterly against her. But since the words of his man of business, few and trite though they were, the manner of her life came before him more painfully, more positively. The little house at Christslea and the recollection of John Vernon came to his recollection with painful clearness. He remembered the first day that he had gone thither, and been welcomed with such frank cordiality and simplicity. He had repaid the welcome ill; he knew it, and, being by nature generous, the sense of his own lack of generosity oppressed him with a sense of error which all the moralists on earth would never have succeeded in bringing home to him.

As he walked in the glad sunshine by the banks of the Brenta, he thought of Christslea as he knew that it must be then; bleak, cold, grey, cheerless, with dull angry waters, and high winds blowing through black, leafless trees, and lonely moorlands shrouded in icy mists. Winter on that coast had always been to him an unendurable and hateful thing; and yet she was living through it by deliberate choice, unaccompanied,

unfriended, and alone. Nay—not always alone. She had Aubrey. Aubrey was a man of scrupulous honour he knew; but he also knew that there are hours in all the lives of those who love in which resistance and strength sleep like the tired Samson in the noon siesta. He knew, too, that his own conduct had given him no title to complain of whatever advantage any other man might take of his absence.

Aubrey was there, sometimes at least, in such familiar intercourse as solitude in the country perforce creates. The idea was not welcome to him. There had been occasionally in him a vague impatience of the high esteem in which she held his cousin, and the comparison which she had openly drawn more than once between their manner of life. Aubrey had been indifferent to women, but women had never been indifferent to him; his person, his intellect, and his fame were all such as might well captivate a poetic and serious woman such as Gladys was, especially if united to a romantic and chivalrous devotion, aided by the auxiliaries of solitude and misfortune.

Guilderoy, who was so profoundly versed in the contradictions and intricacies of the feminine temperament, knew that there is no moment at which it is so susceptible to attachment as that in which it is bruised and bleeding from the offences and the wounds of desertion.

Well, if it were so, he told himself, he had no right to object to it, or to censure her; he had no possible title to ask her to lead a joyless, passionless existence in the full flower of her youth and her beauty. He had taken his own freedom, his own happiness as

he conceived it to be; he had no right whatsoever to deny any possible compensation to her. And yet his pride was hurt at the possibility, though his affections were wholly indifferent to it.

The subject occupied his thoughts when he was alone to an extent which surprised himself; and rendered him even at times preoccupied when in society or even when alone with the woman he loved.

The letters of his sister had been so incessant and so monotonous in their perpetual invective and reproach that he had wholly ceased to reply to them, and of late had long let them lie unopened. Her reproaches had always incensed him; and now that he felt they had much reason for their outcry they were trebly irritating and distasteful to him.

But when his man of business had left him he remembered them, and broke the seals of two or three of the later ones, and glanced rapidly over their contents, passing over their oft-repeated conjurations and condemnations in search for the recurrence of his cousin's name. He found it more than once. In the last letter, which had a date of two months past, the writer wrote:

"The whole world is, I think, in accord in attributing your wife's retreat to the influence of your cousin. It may be right, it may be wrong, but it is certain that it thinks that he, much more than you, has had power to determine her selection. I give no opinion myself. Of course I always saw that he was more than commonly attached to her, but he is a man of honour, and he would not throw his name to the four winds of earth as you throw yours for the sake of any woman. Still,

he is mortal, and the position he occupies is at once very dangerous and very insidious in its appeal to his sympathies. He is the only person whom she ever sees, and the only friend who is admitted to advise her. His sister has repeatedly argued with him to induce him to see this as the world sees it; but always in vain. He appears to consider that he is the natural heir to the duties which you have declined to fulfil; to what extent do you choose him to be so? Whatever may happen, you cannot complain that it happens to you undeservedly."

He read the lines with great wrath and intolerant impatience; then tore the letter up and with it those of similar strain which had preceded it. She was always a mischief-maker; seeing what did not exist, straining at gnats, weaving ropes of moonshine, setting friend against friend, and sowing the seeds of disunion under the plausible pretext, and perhaps in the honest persuasion, that she was pleasing God and serving man. He had always known her to be like that ever since he had been of age enough to be at all observant of what she did; she was a good woman—yes—like thousands and tens of thousands of good women who have all the virtues in their own persons, but have not in their temperaments one chord of sympathy, one fibre of indulgence, one touch of that erring human nature which makes the world akin, one single impulse of that sweet and tender kindness which soothes and stills and comforts maladies which it cannot cure.

A perfectly good woman—yes—and as utterly incapable of doing any real good by her influence as though she were the vilest of her sex! How many of

them there are on earth, and how many men have lived to curse them as they never curse the sinners! He threw the fragments of her letters with hatred into the waters of the canal beneath his window. He knew the irrepressible pleasure in her own accuracy of prediction, in the vindication of her own forebodings by the present facts, which had been in her, all unknown to her, while she had penned all the invectives and lamentations which had preceded and followed her introduction of Aubrey's name. Some hatred he felt against himself, whose actions had given up the fair name of Gladys to the malevolent speculation of the world and to the gratified jealousies of his sister.

He remembered her as he had seen her first in her father's garden in the late autumn afternoon, with the dog's head leaning against her knee and the red foliage of the early autumn touching her hair. What a base return he had given for that sincere and simple welcome! She had spoiled his life innocently, and he had spoiled hers criminally. Absolve himself as he would, his conscience perpetually returned to convict him of his offence. He forgot the intervening years, and only thought of her as John Vernon's daughter; the fair and innocent child of the days before her marriage. His feelings were capricious and ephemeral, but they rarely lacked generosity, and he felt that he to her had been ungenerous; that he had not allowed enough for her youth and her inexperience, that he had brought against her ignorance all the unequal forces of worldly knowledge and trained intelligence, and that he had received her life into his hand in the mere unformed clay of girlhood only to throw it in pieces among the

potsherds of calumny when it had become the full amphora of womanhood. Again and again this image of her recurred to him with increasing reproach. He felt an uneasy and restless wish to return to his own country for a moment, and to see for himself what truth there was in all these stories of Aubrey's visits to her. He did not doubt the facts; but he doubted, or, rather, he refused to believe, the construction put on them by others. Aubrey had always been her friend, he certainly would not have ceased to be so; but from friendship to love there were distances which he did not credit that his cousin would ever pass. The honour which fenced in the wives of other men had never seemed to Guilderoy a very high or impassable fence; but the honour which surrounded his own seemed to him sacred and high as heaven. Yet he thought often, and with ever-increasing irritation, of that stormy and sorrowful isolation of Christslea in the winter solstice which was again so near.

His anger deepened against her with his remorse. She had rejected all his offers, she had withdrawn herself from his home, she had brought the condemnation and observation of the world upon him by the extravagance and strangeness of her actions. So he thought and so he reasoned to himself; but all his anger could not extinguish his consciousness of having drawn her into a position which scarcely any woman of her years could possibly issue from unharmed and unslandered.

He had thought her cold, irresponsive, unsympathetic; but he had been always sensible of the fineness and purity of many qualities of her character, and he knew that they were those to which he could alone

now look for self-control and self-sacrifice strong enough to bear her unharmed through such an ordeal of isolation and abandonment.

"If I could speak to her," he thought more than once; but that was forbidden him by ten thousand reasons. His word had been passed to the woman whom he loved; his desires had been granted him on a condition which was the more imperious because based solely on his honour; he knew that if he again broke his word to her, even though in the very smallest and slightest thing, he would fall lower than the lowest in her sight, and would be degraded beyond words in his own for ever. He had received the gifts of her life on certain terms which were a millionfold more binding on him because merely left to his own good faith. His knowledge of Beatrice Sorìa told him that the meanest galley-slave at work on the quays of Naples would seem to her infinitely manlier and worthier than he if in the merest trifle he transgressed the stipulation she had made.

She had left him wholly free to accept or refuse her condition, but she had understood, and had had the right to understand, that the condition, if accepted, was inviolate. He did not reproach her for it; she could have asked no less, looking both to the past and to the future. Nor could he have said that he regretted it; for he was still happy, although one fear and one remorse assailed him; the fear that though he had again recovered his position towards her, he had never recovered his influence over her; and the remorse that he had been disloyal to the promises he had given to John Vernon.

In all his faults and follies he had been a man of delicate honour, as the world construes the conventional honour it demands of a gentleman; he had never given the world the title to deride or to disdain him; he had always been careful to keep his name out of the mud of public discussion and conjecture; and he was morbidly sensitive to the fact that for the first time in the history of his race a shadow, if not a stain, had been cast upon his name: one which might deepen and darken as the years passed away, and most probably would do so, whilst he would be powerless to efface it and would have but himself to thank for it. In the conflict of feelings which had agitated him in his last interview with his wife, he had not reflected on the innumerable consequences inevitable on his action. He had only seen, on the one side, a woman whom he passionately regretted and loved, and on the other a woman who chilled, fretted, offended, and alienated him. He had chosen between them on a natural impulse, with scarce a moment's hesitation; and he had cast hardly a thought to the many difficulties and penalties which would follow on his choice.

All his life long things had gone well with him. The most serious sorrow of it had been his repentance for his rupture with Beatrice Sorìà, and she had been entirely right when she had told him that all the phases of his love had been rather gallantry than passion. Deep and painful emotions were novel to him and hateful. But they now forced their way into his thoughts, and would not be gainsaid.

He knew well the estimates of men of the world; their large tolerance of many, and their intolerance of

some few, things. He knew that amongst these few must be his action in driving so young and blameless a woman as his wife into her present position. He knew that his contemporaries, however elastic in judgment, must be now his severest critics, not for what he had done as for how he had done it. He had put himself outside the pale of those easy indulgences which the world willingly accords so long as no violence is offered to its codes of convention.

He was proud, and his pride was hurt at the mere thought of how all his friends and acquaintances were speaking of him whenever they remembered him at all; and they would so remember because of the prominence of Aubrey's name. With little right or justice in his anger, he grew each day more deeply angered with his cousin. He persuaded himself that it must have been Aubrey's influence which had decided so young a woman as Gladys to lead so strange and wretched a life.

"I left her everything she could want or wish," he thought in his self-justification. "She was free to live in the world at her pleasure; I had taken care that no blame should rest on her, and I had given her the half of all I possessed; she might have been happy, quite happy, in her own way if she had chosen; it was not I who exiled her to a cottage by a lonely weather-beaten shore, and bade her exist on the pittance that came to her from her father."

Why could she not have continued to enjoy all those material consolations and compensations with which he had so liberally surrounded her? If she had done that, his conscience would have been at rest, and

the world would have seen in their separation nothing but a mutual and excusable agreement to lead their lives apart.

It must have been Aubrey, he reasoned, who had sustained her in her headstrong and extravagant resolution; it was just such a choice as would commend itself to him, austere, romantic, and unworldly.

After a few weeks of irresolution and of many agitated and conflicting impulses, he said abruptly and with much embarrassment to the Duchess Sorla:

"It is absolutely necessary that I should go to England. Would you allow and not misconstrue it?"

She looked at him some moments before she replied:

"My dear, I am not your keeper. And I suppose you have honour."

He felt himself colour under the profound gaze of her deep eyes. He kissed her hand with emotion.

"I thank you," he said simply; he knew that he had once given her every cause to mistrust him for ever. Her confidence in him seemed very noble, and appealed to him as no expressions of doubt or of fear could have done.

"I am utterly unworthy of her!" he thought bitterly. How often his suspicions had wronged her in days that were gone by; how little fitted he had been to be the supreme passion of such a woman's life!

Several days passed by; she asked him neither why he lingered nor when he would go. That reserve in one to whom he had given every title to doubt his word in their past relations seemed to him very magnanimous.

He loved her, he thought, more than he had ever loved her, but all the strength of his admiration could not drive out from him the restless, haunting remembrance of what might be then being said and being done in England.

It was now well-nigh mid-winter; there, dreary, misty, cold, with drifting snows; here gay, luminous, brilliant, with gorgeous sunsets and buoyant wind-tossed seas.

"I shall be away but a very little while," he said to her with hesitation.

"Go as you will," she answered him. He felt that these reins let fall thus upon his neck did in truth and honour hold him more closely than all chains.

"Ah! if only you had always been as kind and as generous," he murmured, thinking of those other days when her impetuous demands and her violent exactions had chafed his soul into revolt.

She smiled with a little sadness.

"Alas, alas!" she thought, "men should not quarrel as they do with our jealousies and importunities; when we cease to feel them life has taken the tenderest fibre out of our hearts. I am never jealous of him now; but sometimes I wish to Heaven that it were only possible that I could be! It is those tempests of folly which give birth to the sweetest of our joys."

She would have given half that she possessed could she only once more have felt all those intense and exquisite pains which are the procreation of the richest joys, could only his absence have tortured her, his presence intoxicated her, as it had once done.

Was it mere caprice or wantonness of fate that

now, when he was so utterly her own in all ways, she had so little gladness in her empire?

Was it indifference, or pride, or really magnanimity which made her leave him unquestioned to go whither he would?

"Nay," she thought, and rightly. "He could not now be faithless to his promise if he would. The handless and footless god that smote Glaucus would smite him for me. He would be the lowest of the low."

And she let him go, and asked him nothing.

"Alas!" she thought again. "It is when men most curse us that they should bless us most. All that immense love which raises them into the deities of our lives only wearies them, satiates them, and makes them cold and fretful; and yet, if only they knew, how much better we are when we can still feel it!—what poor, innocent, fond fools, though so burdensome to them! And when it is gone, it is gone for ever, and something which was best in us is gone too, and we live for our senses, or for our triumphs, or for our intelligences, but we live for a great love no more! But we have learned wisdom, and wit comes to us where adoration has died, and our lovers find us calmer, and they deem their loss their gain—fools, fools, both we and they!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

HE went without halt across Europe to his own country; the weather was cold and dark, the seas were stormy, the winds piercingly cold; after the radiance

and the softness of the land he had left, it seemed to him like entering some dreary Gehenna of tormented and icy air. He travelled straightway to Ladysrood, and went thither unannounced. He had old and faithful servants who kept all others of the household in obedience and subjection; but the great house had a desolate air in its utter abandonment. There was little light, little warmth, all the furniture of the rooms was shrouded in its linen coverings, and only in the central hall was there a large fire burning. His step sounded hollow on floors from which their zealous thrift had removed the carpets, and the hastily-lit lamps struggled feebly against the general gloom.

"I have always told you to keep the house as perfectly ready as though you expected me at any moment," he said with anger.

The people were afraid to reply that after so many months of absence his arrival had seemed to them the most unlikely of all possible chances.

The silence, the coldness, and the loneliness of his home chilled him to the bone. It seemed an emblem of that solitude to which Gladys was condemned in her youth. The night was very cold, and one of the wild winter storms of the south-west country raged without until morning. He slept very little, and rose from his bed unrefreshed. He regretted that he had come there. He sighed for the evergreen orange and magnolia groves, the purpling violets, the unfrozen fountains, the dancing sun-rays of the glad gardens of the Soria Palace. Here was the winter of the earth and the winter of the soul. He cursed the morbid restlessness,

the uneasy discontent, which had drawn him from his paradise.

Now that he was here, what more could he know than he knew? He could not seek his wife; the woman whom he loved had trusted him; he had too much good faith and sentiment of honour left in him not to be true to an unwritten bond.

The storm had subsided with dawn, but the day was dull and heavy, the skies were obscured, and the air was charged with vapour. The sense of immense weariness and depression, which had in other years always come upon him in England in winter, returned upon him a thousand-fold now. He passed the forenoon in his library in intercourse with his men of business and stewards, in the examination of those questions of leasehold and freehold, of forest rights and moor right, of rents and investments, which had been the ostensible reason of his momentary return home. It was well for him that those who served him had truly his interest at heart, for he heeded very little the explanations which they gave him, and signed many papers without knowing very clearly why he did so. He was thinking, as he apparently attended to the prolix arguments of his visitants, of the day when, in that chamber, he had written the letter which had broken off his relations with Beatrice Sorìa. He was overwhelmed with the greatness of her pardon when he thought of that unutterable insult to the proudest of all living women. Then his memories wandered away from her to that other day when he had held the *Horæ* open for a young girl to read, and watched her first blush rise like sunrise over her fair face. It was only

five years before, and in those five years what suffering he had caused to both these women; and yet how well one at the least still loved him, if the other—what of the other?—even if she had been ever too passionless to care for him, yet how much she had lost through him!

The tedious grey day wore away slowly; most of its hours occupied with prosaic details and dull discussions of ways and means, of law and equity, of forestry and finance, and all the various matters of importance which grow out of the management of great estates and of a great fortune. It was dusk when his people left him; he remained in the library beside the hearth, where there was not even a dog to welcome him.

"Where is Kenneth?" he asked of a servant who came in at that moment to light the chandeliers. Kenneth was a colley which had been a chief favourite with both himself and Gladys.

The man hesitated with some embarrassment as to how he should reply.

"Where are Kenneth and the other house-dogs?" repeated his master impatiently. The servant answered timidly that her ladyship had sent for them to Christ'slea a year ago.

"Ah, of course; they were hers," Guilderoy replied quickly, regretful of his question.

She had been quite within her right to take the dogs, nor did he grudge her their innocent companionship; but the kind brown eyes of Kenneth and his comrades, if they had been there to look at him then, would have seemed to break the spell of this horrible loneliness, to ease the burden of these painful memories which weighed on him.

The evening was yet more gloomy than the day. He paced to and fro the suite of the Queen Anne apartments wearily and drearily. They were all restored to their fullest comfort, and had all that light and warmth and the fragrance of hothouse flowers could bring to them, but to him they were immeasurably, unconscionably melancholy.

All his past life came before him in those solitary hours. He recalled all his childish ideals, his boyish admirations of great men, his vague dreams as a youth of some greatness which he would achieve, some added lustre which he would bring to his name and race. Where had all these gone? In what had all these ended? In the lassitude and languor of satiety, in the nerveless indifference of a polished pessimist, in the evaporated fumes of innumerable pleasures quickly tasted and exhausted.

"At least I *have* enjoyed," he thought. "Could Aubrey say as much?"

But though his philosophy consoled, his conscience did not satisfy, him. It was not for mere self-indulgence that his fathers had alone lived; it was not by mere self-abandonment that his country had been made what it once had been.

Great men had, indeed, in all ages been lovers of pleasure, but pleasure had been their pastime, not their sole pursuit. He walked to and fro the length of the now warm and illuminated rooms, and his surveys of his past brought him more dissatisfaction than contentment. To men he knew that he seemed but an idler; to women, perhaps, he seemed a traitor.

The vision of his wife alone in that lonely little

house, amongst the dense sea-fogs and the bare black orchards, haunted him with pain; and the memory of the woman whom he loved as he had left her in the splendour of her beauty, and of the golden evening sunlight pouring through her painted chamber, haunted him with that irresistible and unresisted power which she always possessed over him. In the depression of his solitary musings he seemed in his own sight unworthy of either of them, and wholly undeserving of their constancy or their regret.

Before he slept he sent for the old housekeeper of Ladysrood. She had been with his mother on her death-bed, and had nursed and played with him as a child. He could ask of her what he could not bring himself to ask of any of the men.

"Tell me, Margaret," he said to her as soon as she stood before him in the warm red drawing-room, where John Vernon had bade his daughter live for honour if she could not live for happiness--"tell me, do you ever see my wife?"

The old woman was silent for awhile; the tears started to her eyes.

"Alas, my dear lord, that ever you should have to ask me that!" she murmured.

"Never mind why I ask you; answer me. Do you often see her or ever see her?"

"I have seen her very rarely, my lord, and never to speak to; it was in the open air, and my lady shunned me."

"How does she look?"

"She looks older, but she looks well, my lord. The air is very fine and strong at Christslea."

Guilderoy felt a sense of mortification, for which he hated himself.

"She looks well, do you say?"

"Not ill, my lord, but much older."

"You must hear of her often from the servants or the villagers?"

"There is little to hear, my lord."

"You mean that she leads such a retired, such a secluded life?"

"That is so, my lord. It is the same life as her father led; it suited him, no doubt, but it cannot suit a childless woman of her years."

Guilderoy sighed impatiently.

"It was her own choice."

The housekeeper was silent; she respected him too much to contradict him, and she respected truth too well to agree with him.

"She has all the dogs, they say?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord; she was ever very fond of the tykes."

"And how does she spend her time?"

"Reading, they say, my lord, when she is indoors; and always out when the weather holds, and oftentimes even when it is very bad."

"And who does she see?"

"No one, I believe, my lord."

"Not my sister?"

"Her ladyship has never been nigh her."

He hesitated a moment, then said:

"But she receives visits from my cousin Aubrey, I am sure?"

"Well, my lord, he is the only one of the family who has stood by her."

"I am grateful to him."

Nevertheless his face flushed with an emotion which was not one of pleasure.

"Is he often there?"

"Often, my lord, one may say, for one who is ever toiling for the country as he is, and has so little time left to himself."

"It is very good of him. You may go, Margaret. Good-night."

The old woman curtsied, and withdrew; but as she drew near the door she took courage and came a few steps back towards him. "My dear lord, if I may make so bold, my lady is very young to be left in that lonely life. Maybe she chose it, but some say she was drove to it. She may have her faults, but she has more virtues, and—and—she lost her two children, my lord. Will you not go and see her now you are here, if only for sake of that one memory, my lord?"

Guilderoy's eyes grew dim.

"No, no, I cannot do that," he said hastily and sternly. "But you are a good woman to urge it, Margaret. You do not offend me. Good-night."

"Good-night to you, my lord."

The door closed on her, and he was alone with his own thoughts, which were painful companions.

He had an intense wish to see Gladys, a wish stronger than his anger against her. But all that remained to him of loyalty to a woman who had trusted him to be faithful to her forbade him such double duplicity. The words "Go, you have honour," were ever in his remembrance. Any interview with his wife, any effort even to seek one, any single word which

could even distantly foreshadow the faintest reconciliation with her, were forbidden to him; he had plainly and for ever renounced any possibility of such when he had accepted the conditions on which the woman he loved had again become his.

To have accepted them only to break them, to have had the fulness of her faith only to cheat and evade it as a man can ever do if he wills, would have seemed to him something so foul that he would not have borne his life under the sense of degradation which such an act of betrayal would have left on him. His honour might rooted in dishonour stand, but it was at least loyal to the one who had trusted to it. Yet a great desire was upon him to see his wife; the remembrance of her was upon him as he had known her in the early days of Christslea, and that remembrance softened his heart towards her and outweighed the heavy and bitter memories of their last interview in Naples. The night passed with him again sleeplessly and painfully.

The winds were high and swept round the stately and solid house with gusts of fury; the stillness between them was filled with the sound of rushing rains. The day broke, with no rain falling, but with low and heavy clouds. At noon he rode out in its gloom, and through his woods towards the moors; rode fast against the watery cold air, over the soaked turf, and thinking ever as he went of the time he had ridden thus to seek John Vernon, on a mere idle caprice which waywardness and imagination had raised into a fancied passion for one fleeting hour. The sky was low, the sea was still, the earth was silent as he went; the dull atmosphere and the melancholy solitude oppressed him as with

some sensation of physical ill. Through the mist which hung everywhere over the water and the land the few distant sails on the sea, the few forms passing on the moors of men or cattle, looked unsubstantial and unreal. To him, whose life was always passed in movement or in pleasure, in the gratification either of the senses or of the intelligence, the winter stillness and loneliness of the country and the shore had a feeling of death in them.

His horse, tired with the wet and heavy ground, went slowly, and he did not urge it to more speed; he rode on, lost in his own thoughts, taking, almost without knowing it, the road to the cottage of Christslea. He had the fullest resolve not to see his wife, nor to allow himself to be seen by her; yet with an unconscious and irresistible impulsion he took his way towards the place where she dwelt, until from the level turf of the cliffs above the house he looked down on its thatched roof, its peaked gables, its thick environment of tangled branches. There was not a sound coming from it; a little smoke hung on the vaporous air; a few pigeons flew low under its eaves; a hollytree stood glowing with scarlet berries tall and straight against the sky. To him, come from the vast palaces and marble terraces and sun-bathed gardens of the south, it looked like almost a hovel, with its humble lowliness and modest colouring so like the brown earth and the grey boughs which surrounded it. It hurt his pride to think that his wife should live there in penury and obscurity. She bore his name, she was the mistress of his houses, she had a right to his riches and his possessions of all kinds, and she dwelt here in less comfort and less stateliness than the wife of his steward enjoyed!

And all his world knew it, and any one of his friends who chose could come and see the poorness and lowliness of her lot!

He dismounted and walked to the edge of the cliff and let his horse stray as it would, blown and heated, cropping the short wet turf to its own hurt.

A vague desire to enter the house and ask for her and see her face to face was in him. But he would have been perjured and degraded had he yielded to it. Far away in the golden light of the Neapolitan day was a woman who had said to him—"You have honour."

He remembered her, and to her at least was faithful.

On the tableland of the cliff near at hand was the little barn-like, rustic church of this small sea-parish, and around it were those obscure graves of which John Vernon's was one, conspicuous amongst the low-lying headstones by the fair column of white marble she and he had raised there to his memory with one line graven on it in the language he best loved:

Mori est felix, antequam mortem invocet.

He looked at the white pillar looming faintly through the sea-fog, and had he been a woman he could have wept.

"I was false to him, I was false to him!" he thought; and his heart ached with the futile pang of a regret which cannot reach or atone to the dead.

He had too often pardoned to himself his own transgressions, too often too carelessly excused to himself errors and follies which he thought lightly of because they were welcome and easy; but the sense of

his own disloyalty he could not palliate or smooth away with sophistry; he deemed it a dishonour and he hated it.

For the first time in all his years he was guilty in his own sight. He had promised what he had not fulfilled; he had been untrue to a man who could no more call his actions to account. As he stood looking down on the russet roof and the tangled wood in the shadowy misty winter's morning, he saw the figure of a woman leave the porch and pass under the branches outwards towards the shore. He could not see her face from his position so far above her, but he could see by her figure, by her bearing, by her step, that the house-keeper had said truly—she was in perfect health and strength.

She walked quickly and firmly; the dogs leaping on her and running on before her. She wore the long black cloak of sables in which he had seen her last in Naples. For some minutes he lost her from view under the trees; then she appeared again upon the strip of sandy shore, where the waves were rolling up with low angry murmur as though exhausted by the fury of the past night. Then she turned from the sea, and mounted the cliff path leading to the churchyard. He perceived that she had a basket of evergreens and snowdrops in her hand; she was coming no doubt on her daily errand of visiting her father's grave. The mist was lighter now, and, though some way off her, he saw her plainly as she mounted the steep path cut in the granite of the cliff, so familiar to her from her childhood.

"What a life! what a life!" he thought, "what a wretched life if she have no consolations!"

A violent impulse moved him to demand from her if there were any, if the gossip of the world was true which traced to Aubrey's influence her choice of this seclusion; he wished to tell her that he would be the last to blame her if it were so, and that here, within sight of her father's grave, he would ask her pardon and give her his; so at least there might be peace between them.

And yet, as he watched her from the distance crossing the grass of the cliffs with that elastic step which he had so often admired, and which all women had envied her, a more sombre and more ignoble feeling moved him, a restless jealousy of past possession, a sense that the dignity of his name was in her hands and that she could play with it as she chose, and that he had lost the right to blame her, whatever she might select to do with it.

He watched her pass across the tableland towards the graveyard; she did not look towards him; she went straight on to the wicket of the burial-place, opened it, and passed within; the growth of rose-thorn and privet and holly within its low walls of rubble hid her entirely from him.

He hesitated a moment; a great, almost an ungovernable, wish arose in him to go there and to say to her by her father's grave all the truths which had been so imperfectly uttered in the haste and bitterness of their last interview.

But a thousand miles away a woman trusted him!

To approach his wife, were it even only to say to her an eternal farewell, would be to be a traitor to his pledged word,

He had often been the slave of his passions, the fool of his fancy, but he had always been the servant of his honour.

One ill is not mended by another he knew; one defalcation is not filled up by another; because he had been untrue to the dead man lying there was no reason or excuse that he should be untrue to the living woman who loved him.

He had voluntarily renounced his right to seek or to give explanations from and to his wife. It was one of those privileges of intimacy which he had of his own accord consented to abjure for ever.

He looked once more at the dusky foliage of the churchyard with the slender white column rising into the grey air; and with a sigh he drew his horse's bridle towards him, and led the beast down the precipitous and broken path which turned away from Christslea.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WITH evening he had left his own house, having learned nothing more than he had known before, but carrying with him in his soul the thorns of a restless disquietude and of an impotent regret.

He reached London in the morning and went straight to Balfrons House. Parliament had met and Aubrey was in town. There was a heavy rain falling, and the air was full of ice and sleet. The streets at

that early hour were deserted. The city seemed a vast, colourless, smoking city of the dead.

Aubrey had risen with the day after an hour or two's rest after a prolonged debate. He was in his study, walking up and down the room and dictating to his secretaries before he broke his fast. The yellow and sickly air poured through the chamber dark with bookshelves and bronzes and tables laden and littered with documents of all kinds.

When he saw his cousin enter he paused in the dictation of his letters, and stood still, without any word of gesture or greeting.

"Can I see you alone for a moment?" asked Guilderoy as he entered.

Aubrey motioned to the young men to leave them; they passed into the large library beyond and closed the door.

Aubrey still spoke no word. He stood erect, the habitual stoop in his great height changed to a stateliness that was almost stiffness. He never held out his hand or said any syllable of greeting or of inquiry, his features were cold and stern.

Guilderoy heeded neither his attitude nor his expression.

Twelve months and more had passed by since they had met at Venice and had parted with unuttered but mutual hostility and offence. The knowledge which he had of Aubrey's certain scorn and condemnation of him gave to him an hauteur and an imperious impatience which seemed to his cousin mere arrogance, unbecoming, insolent, and out of place.

Guilderoy was very pale, and his eyes looked sleep-

less, but he had the manner and the courage of a man who arraigns another for wrong done to him, and is very far from all confession of error in himself.

"I am about to put to you a question which no man answers," he said rapidly and without preface of explanation of his appearance there. "At least no man answers in the affirmative. But whether affirmative or denial be in your case the truth, I expect the truth from you, having regard to the blood relationship between us and the position in which we have always stood to one another."

Aubrey looked him full in the eyes.

"What is your question?" he asked in his coldest voice; a passing expression of ineffable disdain came over his features as he spoke.

"It is a very simple one," said Guilderoy. "Are you, as the world says, my wife's lover?"

Aubrey's eyes met his fully.

"I certainly need not answer," he replied with a grave rebuke and scorn in his voice and in his gaze. "You have lost all title to put such a question."

"I have not lost the right, since she bears my name."

"You have lost it morally, not legally. You could not be so ungenerous as to refuse a liberty which you take."

Guilderoy's face flushed hotly.

"If you prevaricate I shall consider prevarication admission."

Aubrey smiled slightly; a very cold, contemptuous smile.

"It is not my habit to prevaricate. I will answer

your question, though I shall refuse to admit your title to put it to me. I am not your wife's lover, and if you had the slightest knowledge of my character you would not come to me on such an errand."

Guilderoy was silent. He did not doubt the truth of the speaker; the whole country would have taken Aubrey's word unwitnessed against that of all other men; but he was dissatisfied.

"If you deny that you are her lover," he said after long silence, "you cannot deny that you have for her a feeling which is far beyond friendship, that you visit her in her solitude, that your assiduous attentions to her are matter of notoriety."

"Am I bound to account to you for feelings unuttered to any human ear? Am I bound to respect for you ties which you have yourself strained to rupture? By what title do you come here? You have forsaken your wife utterly. You have told me that she was wearisome, unsympathetic, indifferent to you. What is it to you what I feel for her, or what I do not feel? I deny your right to attempt to penetrate my feelings, or to arraign my acts."

He spoke with a force which was almost violence, and with a scorn which penetrated the very innermost fibres of his hearer's nerves.

"In every syllable of your answer you confess what you feel!" he said with equal violence. "I may have no title to command my wife's affections; I never possessed them; but she is the holder of my name, and my name is dear to me, and no man shall play with it without being compelled to atone to me."

Aubrey looked at him with unspeakable disdain.

"What would you do? What could you do? A man who has abandoned his wife cannot challenge either her enemies or her lovers; he is nothing in her life. If I were to her what you suppose, what could you say to me in common decency or justice? I should but have filled up the place you left vacant. I should but have soothed the wounds which you caused. You would have no shadow of title to arraign me for it. Even the world itself would prefer my errors to yours, would admit that you had but the payment you merited."

"I care neither what the world would say nor what you would think," said Guilderoy, now white with passion. "I care for the honour of my name, and I should not pause either for your relationship to me or for the admirable lucidity of your reasonings if I believed that you had done me any wrong which would make me absurd and degraded before other men."

Aubrey smiled; the same slight, contemptuous, fleeting smile, which stung Guilderoy like the stroke of a whip, stung him in his pride, his sensitiveness, and his conscience all at once.

"You would make a scandal?" said Aubrey coldly. "You would do unwisely. Men whose names are before the world should keep them clean and hold them high. We might agree to kill each other *en cachette*, but if we called the public in to witness our quarrel we should be worse than fools. We are not playing a melodrama of elective affinities; we are living out our lives before a world which hates us, and is every hour of its day gaping at us to find a chink in our harness or a stain on our shields. You must gratify it if you will. I shall not aid you. I am not the lover of your wife, I

have never spoken any word to her that you would not have been free to hear. I have stood by her, certainly, under the unmerited neglect and obloquy which have fallen on her through you. I should so stand by any innocent woman whose friend I once had been. And so much I admit to you not for my own sake or yours, nor yet because I in any way admit your rights or am moved by your menaces, but because such a declaration is due to her—since it is the truth, so help me God.”

There was a tone in the last solemn words which stilled the fury and awed the soul of his hearer. Guilderoy doubted no more.

“I believe you,” he said briefly. “The whole nation would believe your bare word. I wish to Heaven,” he added with emotion, “that she had been yours, not mine; we should all have been far happier than we are.”

“Such regrets are useless,” said Aubrey. “The greatest burden of man’s life has been created by man, and it is called the holy state of marriage. But—this I must say to you too—if you imagine that she cares for me you are in great error. She cares for you alone. You may bruise her heart as you choose; your name is still the only one written in it.”

“Do not tell me so,” said Guilderoy hastily and with pain. “It can make no difference now.”

“I have told you so because it is so.”

“That may be. It can make no difference in me.”

Aubrey was silent.

“You intend always to live as you are living now?”

“I must in honour.”

"And you leave her virtually widowed at twenty-two years of age, and you exact her fidelity!"

"I exact nothing. And I beg to apologise to you for the time which I have wasted for you in a demand which, as I have expressed my belief, was founded on unjust suspicions."

He lingered a moment, waiting for some expression in return from Aubrey, some farewell, some acknowledgment of his last words. But Aubrey remained standing where he was and said nothing. He did not offer his hand; his features were very cold, his expression almost harsh. He allowed his cousin to leave him without any word or gesture of valediction.

Guilderoy bowed to him in silence and quitted the room.

"If I did not belong to my family and my country, I should kill him before he reaches the street," thought Aubrey when the door closed, as the fire ran through his veins of that old barbaric passion which sleeps in the blood of all men of high courage and strong feeling.

CHAPTER XXV.

IN the following week, he stood on the cliff above Christslea, having responded to a wistful message asking for his return there.

"Why have you sent for me?" he asked her.

"Why do you never come to me unless I send?"

He looked away from her.

"Why," she persisted, "you used to come and see me so very often."

Aubrey hesitated.

"The world is suspicious, my dear," he said at last; "and you are a very young, and, though you always seem to forget it, a beautiful woman. I do not wish them to say evil things of you."

She coloured violently.

"They would never say of us——"

"I fear they do, dear."

She was silent; her face was very flushed and pained.

"How evil the world is!" she murmured. "But let them say what they will. It does not matter. We know——"

"It matters for you."

He moved uneasily; his position towards her became every day of his life more embarrassing to him, more strained, more difficult. The very frankness and perfectness of her confidence in him was an added embarrassment the more.

It seemed brutal to rob her of her only solace, to suggest misconstruction to so much innocence and courage, to place between himself and her the constraint which such a warning must of necessity create.

She sat on the edge of the cliff, unconsciously plucking the little flowerets of the wild thyme which grew so thickly there. He stood beside her and looked down on her.

"Gladys," he said abruptly, "my cousin came to me a few days ago."

Her face lost its warmth and grew very cold.

"I heard that he had been a night at Ladysrood," she answered.

"Yes. He did not approach you?"

"Can you think that he would dare?"

"You forget, he has still the right."

"He has no moral right; no right on earth that I acknowledge."

"You are too harsh, my dear. His rights always exist; and, whether you will hear it or not, I must say to you that I believe his feelings for you are not wholly dead, as you think."

She cast the gathered thyme upon the grass, and rose to her feet.

"I care nothing what they are or are not. His life is dead to mine."

"Is that how your father would have had you speak?"

"My father was a good and wise man, but he knew nothing of a woman's heart."

"Perhaps he knew so much that he believed its forgiveness inexhaustible and its patience divine—as they should be."

She was silent. She stood looking out to the grey wind-blown sea. Her eyes were cold and had no relenting in them, her face had grown pale.

"Some women may be made like that," she said at last. "I am not. He has made his life without me. I have made mine without him. That is all. Why talk of it?"

"How have you made your life? Child that you are, do you mean that you can live all your lonely years like this—always like this, until old age comes to you?"

"Women live so in convents. Why not I?"

"Women in convents live unnatural lives, as from mistaken motives you are doing. Every life without the natural indulgence of its sentiments and affections is restricted, barren, and unblessed."

She was again silent; her eyes watching afar off a fishing-boat tossing in the deep trough of the waves.

"Why do you say these things to me?" she asked at last. "Surely, when one is left alone, there are more dignity and decency in passive acquiescence in one's fate than in any noisy revolt against it?"

"Yes; but if he returned to you? Would your pride stand in the way of reconciliation?"

"Has he told you to ask me that?"

"No; he said nothing which could even suggest it. But it was clear to me that he regretted his own actions, and regret is always near repentance."

"He will never feel repentance, nor even any very real regret. He may feel inconvenience, irritation, anxiety for the world's opinion—caprice, fatigue, satiety—nothing more."

"I begin to think that you have never loved him, Gladys."

"Perhaps not."

He looked at her, troubled and perplexed by her tone; seeing no way into her real meaning, wondering at her strength in keeping the secret of her own feelings so closely in such long solitude.

"There is no love," he said almost harshly, "where there is any consideration of self. There may be desire, pride, pique, egotism; but there is no love. I have told you so many times. I should wish your own heart to tell it you without me."

"Are all feeling, all sacrifice, all pain, then, to be on one side alone?"

"A great love never asks that question, my dear. It gives all it has to give, unweighed."

Something in his voice as he spoke, something in his expression as he looked down on her, went to her heart with a sudden sense of what his feeling was for her. She had never thought of it before; she had taken all his faithful and tender friendship as created rather by his position towards Guilderoy than by any personal devotion to herself. She had been engrossed in that absorbing selfishness which great suffering creates, and she had passed over unnoticed a thousand things which might have told her what he felt had not her whole thoughts and her whole emotions been given to the tragedy of her own fate. Now some vague perception of the truth came to her, although he had so loyally concealed it. Some sudden sense of all which he had done for her, all which he wasted on her, all which he restrained and denied for her sake, came upon her

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with a mute, ineffable reproach. How selfish she had been, and how ungenerous, before this immense and unuttered devotion! She dropped her head upon her hands and burst into a passion of tears.

"Forgive me, forgive me!" she murmured, weeping, not knowing what she said.

"I have nothing to forgive, dear," he said, surprised and touched to the quick. "I want you to forgive, because I know that, unless you do so, no peace will ever come to you."

He waited a moment, but she made no reply.

"I must go now," he said, "or I shall not be able to be in London to-night. Will you think of what I have said? The day will come when you will have occasion to think of it. And, my dear, do not deem me unkind if I cease my visits to you. They are ill-judged by the world, and they displease my cousin. Of course, if you ever need me greatly I will come; but not habitually, familiarly, as I have come of late."

Her face changed, and her brows contracted almost sullenly.

"You will sacrifice me to him!"

"No. But I will not sacrifice you to the evil construction of either your husband or the world."

"I thought you had more courage!"

Aubrey smiled sadly.

"It is not courage which is wanting to me, my child. Perhaps some day you will understand my motives, if you do not now. Meantime, do not misjudge me nor doubt my sincere regard for all your truest interests."

The words seemed very cold to her and conventional.

She was very young still, and she longed for tenderness, for indulgence, for an affection which should let her lean her aching life upon it and there find rest.

When he went from her in the dusky, windy, cloudy day the sense of an immense loss came over her; the solitude of her life closed in on her; and she saw night descend with terror of its sleepless hours.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ON that same day Guilderoy saw once more the smiling sunshine, the green gardens and orange woods, the stately marble walls of the Sorìa Palace. It was late in the afternoon when he reached Naples. A glorious sunset was burning in the west. Innumerable sails covered the sea. The zenith was a deep translucent blue, the air clear and buoyant, with gaiety and healing in its breezes. The streets were mirthful with the sports of early Carnival, and the shouts and songs and clang of brazen music came softened to the ear as he sat once more in the little cabinet of the Albani and looked towards the bay through the marble arches of the loggia beyond.

Whether from pride, magnanimity, or forbearance (he knew not which) Beatrice Sorìa had asked him no questions.

"You have soon returned," she said to him simply, when he first came to her; and she had made no after allusion to his absence or its causes. She knew well

that if he had broken his word to her he would not have so returned, nay, would never have dared to meet her eyes again.

He longed to tell her all that he had felt; the sweetest charm of love is the power and privilege of laying bare the soul in all its inconsistencies and follies; but this pleasure was refused to him by his own action in the past. Where he had been once faithless to her before, delicacy made it impossible for him to say one word which should seem to hint at any regret or any change for or in his present faith to her. That first disloyalty was always there as a spectre between them. It would be impossible to show her all the conflicting emotions which had swayed him by turns during his brief visit to England. He would have been glad to do so; he felt something of the pathetic human instinct to confide in some one beloved the doubts and the self-reproaches which tormented him, and so in a manner be free of their burden of perplexity. But this he dared not do. Under the circumstances of their late reunion, any such confidence must inevitably have appeared to be either a hint of desired freedom or a confession of futile regret; either would be an insult to her. He felt that even any shadow which came over his face, any momentary mood of abstracted thought or of visible depression, must seem a tacit admission that he regretted the price which he had paid for the past year of happiness beside her. He knew that he had once seemed to her the forsworn, cowardly, and treacherous slave of his own caprices; he dared risk nothing which could by any kind of possibility place him in such a light to her again. What

could such a woman as she was, think of him if she ever felt that, even in the full blessing and glory of her love, he could fret at and begrudge the cost which it had been to him? He respected the stronger courage of her nature, he even respected her for the scorn which now and then flashed out of her upon himself, and he felt both reverence and gratitude for the faithful and fervent passion which she had spent and, in so much wasted, upon his life. Nothing can be more untrue than that in such relations as theirs reverence is impossible; reverence is excited by character, not by situation, and he had learned to appreciate her nature as he had never done in earlier days. The very completeness and sincerity of the proof which she had demanded from him had showed a force in her before which he felt himself wavering, weak, almost worthless, of a single thought of hers.

He did his uttermost to conceal the depression which weighed upon him; the distress with which he was haunted when he thought of that little house in the gloom and silence of the lone sea-shore; the anger and impatient shame with which the recollections of Aubrey's words of scorn moved him whenever they recurred to him.

He knew, he felt, that one living man despised him; and that man the one whom of all others he most esteemed himself, and most admired. He had always been irritably conscious of the greatness of Aubrey's life as contrasted with the frivolity and self-indulgence of his own. It was an unendurable humiliation to him to be conscious that he had made it possible for his cousin to address to him those scathing words which

pursued him in memory as though they were the very voices of pursuing ghosts.

And although he had received and had accepted his cousin's statement of his relations to his wife, and did honestly in his soul believe them, yet it made him restless and unhappy to know that their intimacy, however harmless, was familiar and unwitnessed, that even, though only her friend, Aubrey was still her only friend and her most loyal servant. It offended, it wounded, it tormented him; and all his efforts could not conceal from the penetration of Beatrice Soria that the lassitude and dissatisfaction which she had observed in him when in her villa on the Brenta in the past autumn had increased greatly since his brief absence, and were rendered even the more visible by the endeavours which he made to hide them under the over-affectation of carelessness or the over-protestation of devotion. She had the intuition and the penetration which are alone possible to a woman who is too learned in love to be the servant of it, and too sure of her power ever to be vain with petty vanities; she saw in him the reflection of that vague disappointment which had haunted her in her meditations amongst the autumn beauty of her gardens in the Veneto; she realised that he too, like herself, though later than she, had failed to find the same wonder-flower which they had found and gathered together in other years. She was generous; she was proud to arrogance, and she knew human character with a knowledge that made her at once disdainful and impatient of it. She had had her own way; she had ruled him as she chose; she had exacted and enjoyed her just vengeance to the uttermost iota; what more

could the future bring her? And besides this likewise there was in her the generous scorn of a patrician temper to hold by obligation what has fled already in will, to enforce a bond from which the soul had already gone. There was much arrogance in her, and there had been some cruelty, but there was more magnanimity than there was either.

She said nothing to him, but she watched him in the weeks which followed on his return; and she read his mind as though it had been opened before her like a book. She felt with a pang that what she read there mattered but little to her; a year before his emotions had been her world, now it seemed of small account that they should wander from her. What joy would there be in slowly-dying illusion, in slowly-fading rapture, in slowly-chilling passion? What triumph would there be in watching the sure, if gradual, change of ecstasy into monotony, of gratitude into tedium, of fervour into habit? She knew the truth of the Greek counsel, "Break off the laurel-bough whilst it is yet green, and burn it. Wait not until it withers." She was an Epicurean, and carried into the passions of her life at once the fires of the senses and the coldness of philosophy. When she had loved him first she had been all fire; now her wisdom was greater than her love, now she could bear to put her heart under the spectrum and watch its pulses change from fast to slow.

The months of Carnival follies passed, and the spring equinox blew open the spathes of the narcissi and called up the golden sceptres of the asphodel in all the southern pastures. One night they strolled together

along the white terrace which overhung the sea, as they had done a thousand times in the year just passed and in the other years of a still more gracious time. The full moon was shining, the murmur of the waves was audible, the air was heavy with the scent of lemon flowers from the gardens beyond. It was Italy, luminous, fragrant, amorous; yet amidst it all he sighed. The sigh was unconscious, but it was eloquent. She paused and looked at him. A slight smile came on her mouth, half of pity, half of scorn.

"If you are not happy," she said slowly, "remember—I am not your gaoler. Say so, and go."

He started violently, ashamed and bewildered, and ignorant of what he had betrayed.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Happy! You have given me a happiness of which one needs to be god, not man, to be worthy!"

"Yes, you have been happy," she said thoughtfully. "It is something. Well, go whilst you still are grateful for it."

"Go? go where?"

"Go to your wife."

Even by the moonlight she saw how white his face grew as he heard her; he was paralysed with fear and wonder.

"Why do you insult me?" he muttered; "you have my word."

"Yes; I have had your word," she said with disdain, but with no anger. "What is a corpse worth when its soul has fled?"

"You cannot think——"

"I think you are like all men. Once I thought that you were unlike them. But that is long ago."

He winced under the words as though she had struck him.

"Is it dead in you?" he cried with the passion of despair. "Can no love live?"

"I know not," she said wearily. "Perhaps not; who can tell?"

"I can tell. I love you for ever."

"In a sense you do, yes."

She sat down on one of the marble chairs of the terrace; the seat was shaped like a throne, and was covered with a lion's skin. She looked like some great queen come to pass judgment, the silvery tissues and silvery fur of her dress gleamed in the moonbeams, the diamonds which were round her throat shone, her eyes were full of light and heavy with tears.

"My dear, do not let us part in any anger," she said calmly. "Anger is so base in those who have been lovers. Once I was angry often, and to fury even. I would that that time were here still in all its madness, in all its abasement. But it is dead. You have been happier than I in our reunion. I was haunted by the past, which you forgot. I wanted what I could not have—my youth. You had belonged to my youth, and my mind had outgrown you, though I knew it not. Nay, I mean nothing unkind. We change in body and mind. No passion, once broken, will ever bear renewal."

She sighed heavily; he was silent; he was deeply and cruelly humiliated, and yet he knew that she had spoken the truth of herself, if not of him.

"Go to your wife," she repeated. "I am sure that you have seen her, though I am equally sure that you have not spoken with her, for you would never have dared to return to me if you had. You do not care for her; you will never care for her. But she embodies to you peace of mind, social repute, and personal dignity. You attach weight to the opinion of the world. You are wretched if men speak ill of you. With that character neither man nor woman should ever brave the world. They should leave that temerity to those who have both a great passion and a great courage. They alone can do it and never repent. You repent—now—every hour of your life."

"You are cruelly unjust! Never once have I said or thought or felt anything but the very deepest gratitude to you."

"In a sense, no. I am not denying that you love me still. I say that, having the temperament you possess, you cannot be content without the world's esteem. It wearies you to earn it, but without it you are uneasy and ashamed."

"You would make me out the very poorest of fools!"

"No; your feeling is not ignoble, for it comes rather from faithfulness to your race and your traditions than from any minor timidity or selfishness. But, let it spring from what it may, it is in you. You are not a man who can long forget self. You are incapable of a life-long devotion."

"If I live you will see how mercilessly unjust you are."

"No; you would promise what you could not fulfil.

Every year, every day our relations would grow more familiar to you, and so less powerful to hold or satisfy you. Every year, every day you would remember with more bitterness all that you have given up in sacrificing your good name and your position in your own country. Your country is intolerable to you; you hate its weather, its society, its politics, its hypocrisies, and its climate; but yet, having given it up, you sigh for it. As it is with your country, so is it with your wife. You do not care for her—you will never care for her. But she represents something which you have lost by your own act, and so you fret for her."

Where he stood beside her in the moonlight his face flushed painfully.

"It is not that. It is not what you think," he said with agitation. "You know well I have no feeling for her of that sort. But I know that she lives in suffering, possibly even in temptation, and I cannot forget that when I married her I swore to her father that I would make her happiness as far as a man can make a woman's. Of course those promises are made and forgotten in all marriages, people cannot keep them even if they would; but he was a man whom I honoured, and he is dead, and it seems vile to have been false to him. That is all the regret that I feel, that I have felt. I do not think it is a feeling which, if you could wholly understand it, you would despise."

"I do not despise it. But I do not see why it comes to you so late."

He was silent.

He knew well enough that yonder on the sea the night that he had been bidden by her to make and

abide by his choice, he had resolved to choose the sacrifice of his happiness rather than of his word, but that the anger which his wife's unbidden presence had aroused in him, and the impetuosity of his emotions, had hurried him into the choice which had appeared to his companion to be wholly voluntary and dispassionately meditated. But he could not say this to her; and, after all, he knew that his conscience had not spoken to him until in the streets of Venice he had heard the jest about his cousin's visit to Christslea.

"But I adore you, I adore you! I could not bear my life without you!" he cried, as he kissed the silvery furs of her mantle.

"Oh yes, you will bear it," she said with a smile which was half sad, half scornful. "You love me as much as you can love, but it is not very profoundly. And I am quite sure that you will love many after me. The only woman you will never love is your wife. Of that I am satisfied. But you will go back to her. You will place yourself right in the world's eyes. I dare say you will have many children, like the virtuous prince in the fairy-tales, and you will never see me in the world without a sigh. It will be your contribution to the past, and you will imagine that you are wretched because you have lost me; it will even serve you, perhaps, as a *pose* to interest other women!"

He rose to his feet, stung and wounded beyond words.

There was germ enough of truth in the cruel words to hurt him more profoundly than any accusation wholly unjust, and yet there was injustice enough in them to rouse an agony of indignation in his heart.

"Have I deserved this from you?" he said with hot tears standing in his eyes. "Have I ever given you right or cause to say such things of me? Once, indeed, I sinned against you, I offended you. I have done my best to atone for that. Which of us is it now who first speaks of severance and of disillusion? Which of us is it now who finds our relations insufficient and monotonous? You are unjust to me—cruelly, barbarously unjust. I have told you the truth of my own feelings as I analyse and find them. If my candour wrongs me in your sight I cannot help it. If a man and a woman, after years of intimacy, cannot speak the truth to one another, who can? The remorse that I feel for my own failure to pledges which I voluntarily took has nothing to do with my devotion to you. I am neither a great man nor a good one, but such as I am I have given you all my life. I ask nothing of you or of fate but to be allowed to so give it ever."

The tears which had dimmed his eyes rolled down his cheeks. He felt passionately and profoundly; and he felt also his own utter impotence to persuade her that he did so.

She looked at him with the tender but tranquil gaze of a woman who has loved but loves no more.

"Whilst I could and did believe that I loved you greatly, I had the right to take your life to mine. Now that I do not believe that, now that I look in my own heart and feel that in much it has ceased to respond to yours, I have no longer such a right. I am bound to restore you to your world, to your freedom, to your friends."

"And you think that my life is to be thrown aside

like that as if it were a mere toy of which you had tired!"

"I have never treated it as a toy, nor ever treated it lightly, though once you treated mine so. You are unhappy, and you will be unhappy—for a time. But you will be reconciled to yourself, to your society, and to your wife. Our position is one in which there can be the most perfect happiness, whatever moralists may say, so long as there is perfect love. But so long only; and that is not between us now, though there are the memories of it. They must be sacred enough to preserve us from all recrimination, from all enmity."

The silence which followed on her words was filled only by the voice of the sea.

The splendour of the night was around them, and in its stillness there arose the song of an early-singing nightingale, breaking its heart in the orange grove. He gave a gesture of despair and cast himself once more at her feet.

"I cannot live without you! I cannot—I cannot!"

She stooped and kissed him fondly, and with lingering touch upon his brow and hair.

"Yes, you can; and you will. Do not wait to feel our affection decay and dwindle by inches day by day. Let us part while we still care enough to part in tenderness. So, dear—good-night."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A FEW nights later Aubrey walked home from Westminster after a tedious debate; a weary waste of breath and speech serving no purpose but to bewilder brains already dull enough, and deafen a country already only too obtuse. He was fatigued, and was glad to breathe even the close air of London streets after those many hours of suffocating and useless verbiage.

His thoughts went, as they did ever in his lonely moments, to Gladys. Was she sleeping and dreaming, forgetful of her sorrows? Or was she sleepless and dreamless in that little chamber under the apple-boughs, within the sound of the sea. When he entered the great gates of Balfrons House it was almost daybreak; he went to his writing-room as usual to glance at any letters or despatches which might have come during the evening. There were several; but prominent to his eyes amongst them was a large envelope bearing the post-mark of Paris and addressed to him by Guilderoy.

"The only woman whom I love has dismissed me," said this strange message. "I am free with such poor freedom as can be enjoyed by one who will for ever drag behind him the weight of an unchangeable regret. I shall never love the innocent woman whom I have married; but I will, if she accepts such reparation, do my duty by her. I cannot, I dare not promise more.

I have been false, often involuntarily, to all my past promises save one hitherto; but to this promise which I now offer I will be faithful if her indulgence is extended to me and her affections can be satisfied with respect. I send my letter to her through you, first because I know that you have more influence over her than any one; and, in the second place, because I owe you amends for the insult and the suspicion which I passed upon you. I can give you no better proof of my conviction that both were undeserved by you than by sending through you this offer of my future to her. I trust to your loyalty and your honour in confiding such a mission to them, and can think of no better way to prove to you that I am confident you are her best friend and my most faithful adviser. You used harsh and bitter words to me when we last met; but they were such as I esteem you for, and if severe they were deserved. I have had too much vanity and too much success in life and in love; I have, in both, now received the most humiliating and the most indelible rebuff. I have failed to retain the heart and to satisfy the imagination of the one woman for whom I have felt a lasting or an unselfish passion. For my suffering you will care nothing, and you will say that in bringing a crippled and mortified heart to my wife I shall but offend her further. It may be so, and if she thinks so I shall not protest against her decision. But, again, you have said that she loves me still, and women who love content themselves with little. The immensity of their tenderness is wide enough to cover all shortcomings, and they are happy if they can heal any wounds, even if those wounds have been made by other women.

I do not know that she has this tenderness to me; she has always to me seemed very cold. But you have said that she has it, and has it for me. Be this as it may, she is proud; she may prefer to silence the tongues of the world by a reunion which shall be as real, or merely as apparent, as she pleases. There has been no publicity such as would make such reunion impossible, and the world, if we resume our former life, will soon forget that we have been separated. At all events I have thought that duty and honour, however tardily obeyed, lead me to offer my future to her. She can do with it what she pleases."

Aubrey flung the letter on the floor in passionate anger. Its sincerity he did not doubt, but the mission it placed on him was loathsome.

"Can he not go back to her without my intervention?" he thought bitterly. "Must he needs call on me to rejoin his broken ties? Could he find no other messenger? Could he not write to her direct by ordinary means? What title has he to put such a burden upon me? What right, in Heaven's name, to bid me carry his soul to her and beseech her to wash it white?"

He knew that Guilderoy had written to him in all honesty and well-meaning, intending to make reparation for his suspicions by an act of perfect and even chivalrous confidence. He did justice to the motives which had dictated the letter, but he cursed the writer for its cruelty and for the task which it laid upon him. For awhile he was tempted to reject it; to send it back, with its enclosure, and say, "I cannot be your ambassador. She is yours—go to her without preface."

Thrice he wrote those lines, or lines similar to them; and then tore them up, dissatisfied with them as cowardice and selfishness. If he loved her as he did, should he lose any occasion of opening the gates of happiness to her? He knew that she was proud and unforgiving; that she deemed herself bound in self-respect to adhere to her choice of a lonely and self-sufficing life; he knew that Guilderoy, going to her simply because the woman whom he loved had dismissed him, would almost surely be dismissed by her with scorn and even with hatred.

Was not he, who knew this, bound to do his uttermost to stand between her and what would be to her lifelong severance from one whom she loved? to employ such means as he possessed of swaying her mind and persuading her character to bend to that forgiveness without which she would be eternally wretched? to do for her in this moment of her life what her father would certainly have done had he been living now?

He was obliged in no way, indeed, to serve her or his cousin; he could let their lives drift apart as they might, and would have no need to blame himself or fear the blame of others. But that cold neutrality seemed base to him; that withdrawing of his conscience behind the pale of what was obligation, and what was not, seemed to him poor and mean; generous natures know nothing of such cautious limitations.

"If I love thee, what is that to thee?" he thought. Nothing indeed, but to him it was much; to him it seemed to require from him as much devotion and service as though she had been wholly his. She had

trusted him, entirely and innocently trusted him; to Aubrey this gave her title to his allegiance for ever.

He took up the letter for her which had been enclosed in Guilderoy's. It was left unsealed for him to read it. He did not read it, he could guess the contents; they must be, he knew, the same that had been said to him, softened and mitigated probably, but the same in substance. He put it unread in the inner pocket of his coat and rang for his private secretary.

"I must go into the country for a day," he said to the young man; "there is nothing pressing at the House for the moment, and I shall be back to-morrow night in time for a division if there be one. See to these matters;" and he gave him the directions necessary for the conduct of many subjects of importance and urgency with the rapidity and clearness of explanation which becomes second nature to public men. In another hour he was in the open country, and in the midst of fields and woods bathed in pale sunshine, going towards the south-west sea-shore where the village of Christslea lay, with the swell of Atlantic rollers beating against its cliffs.

He had not seen her since the day that he had told her that he could have no mistress in any sense of love save England. He had written to her briefly from time to time, to hear of her health; but no other intercourse had taken place between them. In his letters to her he had pleaded the stress of his Parliamentary work as the reason of his absence. She understood what the true reason was, and did not urge him to visit her as she had been used to do. But the weeks and months had been more dreary, more intolerable to

her, now that she had lost the one relief, the one solace, the one pleased expectancy of his occasional visits, and often she wished wistfully that she were lying insensible to all pain beside her father under the mossy turf.

The companionship and the correspondence of Aubrey had been to her a far greater happiness and consolation than she had known until they had almost ceased, or had at the best passed into an infrequent and restrained assurance of friendship. Often now as she walked to and fro the shore in the rough winds of the early spring weather, she felt with a feeling akin to terror that it was not Guilderoy but his cousin whom she missed, whom she thought of, whom she regretted. All that serious and tender solicitude for her, all that manly and generous devotion to her, although so carefully kept within the bounds of friendship and family relationship, had penetrated her inmost nature with its unselfishness and moved her to a gratitude which was in itself a form of affection. She had not been conscious of how great a place he occupied in her life until the cessation of his visits to Christslea.

She began slowly to realise, as she had never realised before, what were those dangers to her of which her father had warned her in words whose meaning she could now read by the light of her own heart. Her present was a blank, and her future was one which terrified her. She began to realise also how frightful a thing was this utter loneliness to which she was self-condemned. There were moments when it was all that she could do to find strength to resist the impulse to cast herself headlong from the rocks, to seek the

numbness and dumbness of death amongst those tossing waves in which her rosy feet had paddled in infancy, finding in them her merriest playfellows. It was the memory of her father which alone sustained her against the supreme temptation of isolated lives. She seemed to hear his voice saying to her in the words of the Athenian by whom a higher creed was reached than any priests ever taught, "When death approaches, the mortal part dies, but the immortal part departs, safe and uncorrupted, having withdrawn itself from death." Should she dare to put out that light of the soul with her own hand?

Her father had rightly foreseen that those friends who would serve her best in the trials of her life would be those Immortals with whom he had taught her even as a child to converse.

With the approach of the tardy English spring the burden of her days grew heavier, and their solitude more unbearable in its vacancy. When all the gladness of reviving life is coming to all animate things and to the waking earth itself, all youth which is lonely and unloved feels its isolation, and its physical and spiritual desires, with more cruel sharpness than at any other period of the year. Greenness to the grass and glory to the flower can return—why not the joys of the senses and the soul?

She knew that Aubrey had said aright; that her life was barren and unblessed. Was it her own fault that it had become so? Had she lacked gentleness, sympathy, indulgence—all those unpromised gifts which love should bring unasked, and without which the bare promise of fidelity is naught. Humility had come

to her, and great sadness, and contrition, and self-censure; she began to learn how hard it is to guard the gates of the soul from its tempters, how useless to pledge feelings which must change as the mind and the heart grow older, and demand more, ere they can be satisfied. She ceased to blame her husband in proportion as she ceased to care for him. Her love seemed to have died out of her with that violent and delirious jealousy which once had moved her so absolutely, and now seemed dead as last year's leaves.

It was a balmy and sunny afternoon when Aubrey reached Christslea. The cattle, released from their stalls, were straying at will on moor and pasture. The first fisher fleet of the spring-time was visible in the offing, red-brown sails against a silvery-blue sky. The orchards were all in blossom in a sweet confusion of rose and white. The pigeons flew above the boughs and the sea-gulls flew above the waves. It was all soft, cool, pale, and fresh; English in its sobriety and simplicity of tint, and with the haze and the scent of the morrow's rain in the air. She was standing in the orchard when he put his hand on the latch of the gate. A joy of which she was wholly unconscious broke over the sadness of her face like sunshine as she saw him and came towards him.

"It is so long since you were here!" she said, holding out both her hands to him.

He took them in his own, but did not hold them for more than a moment.

"Yes, it is long," he said, with a sigh.

All that welcome and affection speaking in her face

were to him as the sight of a spring of clear water to a tired wayfarer who cannot reach to drink of it.

"Have you missed me?" he asked, involuntarily.

A shiver passed over her as she stood in the pale sunshine.

"Very much," she answered simply.

He was silent.

Then he said abruptly, "Let us go up on the cliff; I have something to tell you which will be best told by your father's grave. Besides, under all these blossoms and boughs one cannot breathe."

"I will go where you wish," she said; her newborn happiness was startled and over-shadowed. She had a presentiment of ill.

They walked almost in silence out of the orchard, and across the stretch of rough grassland which parted it from the cliff-patch which Guilderoy a few months earlier had seen her ascend. It was early in the afternoon, and the silence was unbroken around them; the air was sweet and strong, the sea calm. They crossed the head of the cliff until they reached a seat under the churchyard wall, shaded by the evergreen hedge and the yews and pines of its enclosure.

"We will wait here," said Aubrey. "You can see the sea; it is always your friend and counsellor."

The graveyard, with its tall and slender marble pillar rising above the evergreen foliage and the light, silvery, shadowy wands of blossoming willows, was behind them, and before them, far below, the grey and tranquil waters of the bay.

"I have this letter to bring to you from Evelyn,"

he said, and took out the note addressed to her and offered it to her.

As she recognised the handwriting she grew very pale, and an expression that was almost terror came into her eyes.

"He has no right, no right whatever, to address me," she said, and made a gesture to refuse the letter. It fell on the turf between them.

Aubrey stooped for it and offered it to her again.

"He has every right," he said coldly, "and you are bound to read whatever he says to you. Do not be either obstinate or ungenerous."

"It is you who are ungenerous to me."

"Do not let us quarrel, my dear," said Aubrey, in the words which Beatrice Sorìà had used to Guilderoy. "Life is painful enough without dissension. I bid you read this letter, first because I know the contents, and know that they are such as you are bound to consider, and because, in the second place, as I have been made the bearer of it, he would think that I had betrayed my trust if you refused."

She was silent some moments; then she took the envelope from his hand, and opened it and read what it contained.

She read it rapidly, guessing rather than perusing its sentences.

"Aubrey will tell you better than I can write to you what it is I ask from you after these many months of silence and separation. Do not think, my dear, that I would urge any rights that the law may give me when I have morally forfeited them; and do not think that I would seek to persuade or to solicit

you. I tell you frankly, the woman I love, for whom I left you, loves me no more. This avowal is the greatest proof of my sincerity and of my humility that I can give to you. I make you no grand protestations, but, if you care to do so, our life together might be renewed, with every wish on my part to make it happier for you than the past has been. Marriage is the cruellest of all mistakes, and I cannot ever regret enough that I led into its captivity your innocent and ignorant youth. I can only say that the error was made by me in all good faith, and that if I have been untrue to my promises to you and to your father I have always been so without premeditation and with self-reproach which has been more poignant than you would consent to believe. I have offended you, and I will not seek to palliate my offence by saying, as I perhaps might say with some show of self-justification, that you did not give me either that sympathy or that indulgence which I had hoped for from you. It is enough to say now that if you care to do so I am willing to begin our lives afresh."

The letter was manly, sincere, and plainly written from the heart; it would have touched and won any woman who had loved him into forgiveness of faults even much graver than his had been; but it did not touch hers because the feeling which had bound her to him was dead, and a dead thing can return neither cry nor caress. She read it. Then she threw it again on the ground.

"He comes to me because she has dismissed him!" she cried with violence, her nostrils dilated and quivering like those of a blood-mare under the spur.

"It is at least honest of him to tell you so. He could easily have affected to you that he abandoned her for your sake. Believe me, candour in a man of the world to women, and about women, is the very rarest of all qualities."

She turned on him with passionate indignation and suffering.

"You defend him; you always defend him! Why should he choose *you* as his messenger? Has he not hurt me enough already?"

Aubrey passed over the admission which was confessed in her words.

"He chose me because he had been unjust to me and wished to give me this mark of his confidence," he replied, with that self-negation which he had imposed on himself when he had accepted the mission to her. "I do not defend his past conduct. He knows all that I think of it. But I am compelled in honour to say now, that I believe he desires fully to make such reparation to you as may be in his power."

"Because the Duchess Soria has wearied of him!"

"Not only because of that. He is neither heartless nor conscienceless, and he felt bitterly months ago that he had been false to his promises to your father. I think you may believe what he says now the more fully because he makes no protest of feelings which do not move him, and which would be even an insult offered to you at this moment, however the future may renew them in both of you."

"They will be never renewed. *Their* love was renewed because it had once been great; but between him and me there has never been such love—never,

never! A year ago it would have made me glad," she said wearily. "I should perhaps have scorned myself, as I told you that I should do, but I should have been happy. Not now. He has waited too long. What does he think I am that I should be willing to meet him after all these months?"

"He thinks you are what you are—his wife."

"He set me free from that bond when he left me."

"Your father would not have said so."

"But I say so. Go you and tell him so. Why does he seek to return to me? Not out of real remorse, nor any tenderness; only because he is proud and he knows that the world blames him."

"You are too harsh."

"Truth is harsh."

He felt a mad longing to lift her in his arms and bear her far away from all their world before his cousin could reach there to claim her. For a moment all the soft pale sunshine seemed to him red as blood, and the beating of the sea upon the sands like the throbs of the many human hearts sounding in agonised revolt against the brutalities and the hypocrisies of social law.

"If he had written it a year ago—six months ago—it would have made me happy. I would have forgiven all—ah! what do I say? love always forgives because it *is* love. Now I cannot forgive because I have ceased to care! Why does he come to me when it is too late? Go, tell him so. It is too late! too late!"

"It is never too late for a woman's mercy——"

"Mercy! What mercy would there be in a feigned

welcome? What is the body without the soul? What use to give him myself when I cannot give him my affections?"

"You will give them again when you have seen him once more. You are dreaming of coldness and of harshness that you do not feel——"

"I have ceased to dream long ago. I know what life is too well. Dreams are for the happy."

"Surely on your side——"

"Yes; I loved him as one loves when one is very young; but it is dead in me; it is dead, dead, dead, I tell you, like any skeleton of any drowned creature that lies at the bottom of that sea!"

Aubrey turned from her, and walked to and fro upon the turf before her. The pain of the moment was almost beyond his strength, well tutored though it was.

"You think so," he said after a long pause; "you think so because you are hurt, indignant, and even more outraged at his solicitation of forgiveness than you were by his original desertion. But this will pass away. You once loved my cousin with passion if not with wisdom; he is not a man whom women forget. When he comes to you, you will consent to what he wishes; you will pass over those eighteen months of bitterness, you will only remember that you were once devoted to him, and that he was the man who taught you the first meaning of love, and was the father of your dear children."

"No, no, no!" she said with violence. "No—for ever no! His place is empty in my heart. There is a stone there; no warmth, no desire, no remembrance;

only a stone, the stone which has the seal of oblivion, the stone that you set on a grave!"

She threw herself on her knees beside the wooden bench and buried her face in her hands, and sobbed with the convulsive weeping which he had seen once before.

"Why could I not meet you first! *You* would have been true to me!" she cried in the passion of her tears; not knowing what she said, knowing only that a great nature was wasted on her in vain, without joy to itself or gladness to her.

Aubrey sighed; his features changed and his eyes filled with an unspeakable yearning.

He saw that her heart in its indignation, its solitude, its want of sympathy, and its recognition of sympathy, both of feeling and of temperament, in him, turned towards him instinctively as a beaten child turns to those who will soothe and caress it. He saw that with but little effort he could detach her from what still remained in her of love for his cousin, and lead her humiliated and lonely soul to his, there to find comfort if not joy. He knew that he had in him the power to console her, the heart which could alone meet and content her own; but he knew, too, that it rested with him to awake her to this knowledge or to let it slumber in her unaroused for ever. He had never before deemed it possible. He had been wholly sincere when he had told his cousin that she cared nothing for himself. But in this moment, in her whole attitude, in the tears she wept, in the broken words she muttered, he realised that it would not be a task beyond his powers to make her see in him more than a friend, to lead her from gratitude to

other and warmer emotions, to suggest to her that the greatest chastisement which a woman can take upon a faithless love is to find and make her life's happiness without it. For a moment all his heart and all his senses made the temptation more than he had strength to bear; but with an instant's meditation he found force to resist.

"I should not have loved you in that way, my dear," he said, with a lie which was more heroic than any truth. "Long ago I loved one woman madly, and she was false to me. I would have told you my story before now, but I never thought that you would care to hear it. I gave to her all that a man can give, and she rewarded me by the lowest of intrigues, the foulest of infidelities. I was very young when she robbed my life of all its colour and warmth, and left me only such cold consolation as may lie in the pursuit of public duties. But she closed my heart to passion for ever. I can feel affection and devotion—I feel them both for you—but nothing beyond those. Do not think of me ever as a lover for any living woman. The only mistress I shall ever have, in any sense of love, is England."

His voice was low and grave, and infinitely tender; his declaration was an untruth, but it was nobler than all truth.

"Even were it otherwise with me," he said wearily, "I could not, I would not, risk the accusation from my cousin and the world that I had abused his trust in me, that I had taken advantage of his absence and your loneliness. I may mistake, and think that honour in me which is only selfishness; but this is what I feel

and what would guide me if—if—you were still dearer to me than you are.”

He paused, and his deep and laboured breathing sounded painfully upon the country silence round them.

“And if,” he added, “if I be so urgent with you to receive Guilderoy and reunite your life to his, it is because I feel that in the earliest years of our acquaintance I perhaps did wrong in enlisting your confidence and giving you my sympathy. I often now blame myself; I perhaps helped to alienate you from him. I perhaps turned towards myself sympathies and confidences which, had I not been there, might have found their way in time to him. I ask you, dear, to take this remorse from me. He has many lovable qualities; he has many high talents; he feels sincerely towards you, if not warmly; you may make his future such as his boyhood promised, if you care for him.”

“But I do *not* care!”

She rose to her feet; her features were stern and scornful, her eyes were full of passionate feeling burning through their tears; he seemed to her as cruel as Guilderoy had been, as the world had been, as life had been; caring nothing for her, and her pain, and her fate; caring only for the world’s opinion and a man’s egotism, and the mere pride of race.

“Then I have more remorse than I thought, or than I have strength to bear,” he said, as his eyes met hers for one moment in that regard which strips bare the heart and unveils the inmost soul.

Without another word, or any sign even of farewell, he turned away from her and went with rapid steps across the grassland and down the pathway of the cliff.

She stood motionless and looked after him, her eyes wistfully searching the vacant air long after he had passed from sight.

The spring night was cold and the dews falling heavily when she left the place where her father lay, and returned with slow and tired steps to the house.

She had her husband's letter in her hand. When she reached her chamber, she read it again and again, trying to awake with it one chord of the music which was silent in her soul.

Life seemed to her hard, conventional, artificial, hateful.

One man left her because his honour was dearer to him than she was; and one man returned to her because he was uneasy whilst the world thought ill of him.

What was the worth of love or friendship if they quailed before the opinion of others?

What use were the beauty, and the heart, and the mind of a woman if they could inspire nothing more than that?

She passed the hours of the night walking to and fro that narrow bedchamber where she had slept as a child, hearing the hoarse notes of the village clock record the dreary passing of the time.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THAT night Guilderoy was in his house in Paris, the prey to many conflicting feelings which banished the carelessness and ease with which his nature had hitherto met the complexities of human life.

He was not sure whether he most wished or most feared his wife's acceptance of his offer. He had been entirely honest in all that he had written to her and to his cousin; but he dreaded the results of it with that shrinking from all pain and all obligation which had always been so strong in him.

He could not dismiss the anxiety which governed him; he could not eat or sleep, or seek his usual distractions in this city which was so familiar and so pleasant to him; he was restless under the sense which haunted him of the inevitable scorn with which Aubrey would regard his vacillations and his confidence, and he already repented the impulse which had made him select his cousin as his intercessor.

He wished that he had gone himself without any preparation or mediation to Christslea as the day and the night wore onward, and each succeeding hour might bring him a message from Aubrey.

His heart ached for the first time in his life under a wound which could not be closed or stilled by any anodyne of pleasure. The humiliation with which the

dismissal of the woman he loved had filled him would not pass away for many a year; perhaps never.

He was conscious that she had weighed him in the scales of her fine intelligence and found him wanting; he knew that he had failed to respond to her imagination; he knew, too, that what she had ceased to give to him she might give to others. He had been weary, dissatisfied, and haunted by remorse when with her, but without her his existence was a blank and his soul torn by a vague but intolerable jealousy.

He who had never before known that passion which is the companion of unhappy love was now, if it be possible to be so, jealous at once of two women whose affections he had possessed utterly, and yet whom he had both, through his own inconstancy and vacillation, lost; and for the first time in his whole life neither his careless philosophy nor his swiftly-changing caprices could solace him or build up anew the cloud-palace of amorous content. He was dissatisfied with himself. All that was best and most spiritual in him condemned him in his own eyes. He could have defended his conduct easily to others, but he could not defend it to himself.

It was dawn in the streets of Paris, and birds were twittering in the lime-trees beneath his window when his servant brought him the telegram he was expecting from his cousin.

He tore it open nervously.

"I have done what you asked," said Aubrey in it. "I have no mandate from her, but I believe it will be as you wish. Go yourself."

Was he glad or not? He could not tell. He was

conscious of a weight of duties and obligations which rolled back like a stone over his life; but he was also conscious of that relief which comes from a choice finally resolved and a conscience quieted and appeased. Amidst all the chaos of his thoughts he was touched to admiration of Aubrey's generosity and loyalty. Not one man in ten millions would have accepted such a task, or, accepting it, would have executed it to the end with perfect self-abnegation. He could not have reached such stoical nobility himself; but he recognised the greatness of it.

"I shall go to England this morning," he said to his people; and as he spoke the door of his room opened and his sister entered. She had arrived that moment in Paris, and had come there without changing her clothes, taking an hour's sleep, or even breaking her fast.

He saw her with displeasure. They had not met since the late summer which had followed John Vernon's death; and the remembrance of her letters which he had read in Venice was fresh and hateful in him.

She seemed ever to him like a bird of evil omen watching and waiting till the corpse of some dead human happiness fell to her. And yet she was what the world called a good woman—pious, chaste, virtuous. and wise.

"Why are you here?" he said with impatience and discourtesy, making no affectation of a welcome which he could not give or of a pleasure which he could not feel.

"Is that all the greeting you give me after all these months?"

"I cannot pretend what I do not feel," he said irritably. "I am sure that you would not come to me thus, unannounced, unsummoned, unless you had some bad news to bring or some cruel suspicion to suggest."

"You are unjust"—her voice was broken, her lips quivered; she was tired, cold, and unnerved; in her own way she loved him, and she felt that even such affection as he had ever felt for her was gone.

"I am not unjust," he answered coldly. "You have never ceased to irritate and alienate me. You mean well, perhaps, but if you have the intentions of a saint, you have the insinuations of a fiend. I received all your letters in Italy. I never answered them because they offended and disgusted me. You always hated my wife. You recognised the fineness of her nature, but you never ceased to be pitiless to her. I do not know it; but, I am as certain as that we stand here, that it was you who informed her of my relations, before my marriage, with the only woman I ever loved."

"I thought it right that she should know of them," replied his sister, who was never without courage. "And those same relations renewed after marriage have been made public to every one by yourself."

"What is that to you?" said Guilderoy, white with ill-controlled passion. "You are not my keeper. It is nothing to you what I do. You are a good woman—oh yes!—and you make your virtues into a sheaf of poisoned arrows with which you slay the lives of others. What did you write—what did you dare to write—to me in Venice and elsewhere? You slandered Aubrey, whom the whole country respects; you slandered my wife, whose first and staunchest friend you ought to

have been; and you insinuated to me suspicions which might very easily, had I been either more credulous or more hot-tempered, have ended in bloodshed between my cousin and myself, or at the best in a public quarrel which would have disgraced us both. That is what you call goodness, sincerity, affection! God deliver me from them and send me sinners; sinners of every sin under heaven, but with sympathy in them and generosity and mercy!"

She was silent for a moment. She had never seen him so fully roused, so reckless in denunciation; she loved him greatly, and she felt in every word the severance one by one of the ties of consanguinity and habit which had bound them together.

But she was a woman who was pitiless in pursuit of her purpose; unchangeable in her opinions and her conduct, unrelenting in her tyranny and curiosity and meddlesome inquisition into the lives and thoughts of others.

"I pass over your insults and your ingratitude," she said, with difficulty controlling the rage she felt. "I wish only to ask you one question. I have come from England to ask it. I heard by chance that you were in Paris. Is it true that you intend to effect a reconciliation with your wife?"

"Who told you that I do so?"

"No one told me. But I have heard its possibility discussed, vaguely in society."

"Well? What then?"

"You cannot mean it? You could not drag your name in the dust? Your severance from her was bad enough; but your reconciliation to her would be worse,

ten million times worse. It is not to be thought of, not to be dreamed of, for one instant! You owe it to your whole family!"

"What do I owe to my family?"

He had grown quite calm; his violence had spent itself, but she, who had known him from his earliest years, knew that this tranquillity had more real menace and sterner meaning in it.

But she had never quailed before the fury of any of the men related to her whom she had tortured, fatigued, and injured for their good, as their good was seen by her.

"You owe it to your family," she replied, "to your family and to yourself, not to take again into your life before the world a woman who has lived as your wife has done in your absence."

"How has she lived?"

"How? As no woman in her senses could have lived. Withdrawn from every one; herself a mark for the most odious suspicions, receiving no visits save from one man whose name already had often been connected with hers. You used to be proud, you used to care beyond all things for your name—what will the whole world say of you if, after more than a year and a half of such a life as that, Lady Guilderoy is once more admitted into your houses and your heart?"

Guilderoy looked at her; and bold woman though she was, she was afraid of the effects of her words.

He smiled slightly; his smile was very bitter and very contemptuous.

"If you only came here to say this," he said, "it was a pity you did not remain in England. I should

then at least have been able to forget all that you wrote to me in Italy. You are a virtuous woman, but you are a cruel woman. If you had any mercy in you, you would have been stirred to compassion for Gladys; you would have gone to her, you would have counselled her, you would have set the shield of your unblemished position between the world and her. Even if you had hated her, still you should have done so for my sake. Aubrey alone did what he could. I am grateful to him. Whoever hints a word against him is my enemy. The mistake made by Gladys was the mistake of an imaginative, unworldly, and over-sensitive nature; but it was a noble mistake—one which none but an ignoble nature could possibly misjudge. I am blamable in much, but I am not utterly vile. I offended her, and, if life permits it to me, I will atone to her. It never occurred to me as possible that the world could blame her for my fault. Possibly it would never have dared to do so had not you been the first to cast a stone at her."

"Are you the dupe of your wife as you have been of others?"

"I am no one's dupe, except my own sometimes. And now you will pardon me if I leave you. The house of course is yours to stay in if you choose. But I am about to leave for England, and you will pardon me if I say that I wish to go alone. Short as the journey is, it would be too long for me to make it in the society of one who is the unkindest enemy of myself and of those who are dear to me."

"What! Does the devotion of a lifetime count for nothing? Are those dear to you whom you forsook, and

by whom you have been betrayed? Do you utterly forget all my affection, all my forgiveness, all my defence of your errors in the world, for sake of a woman whom you are tired of one day and idealise the next, only because she no longer cares what you do?"

"My good sister," said Guilderoy, with something of his old manner, "I told you long ago that you were equally discontented with me whether I took the paths of vice or the paths of virtue, to use the jargon of the world's very arbitrary and rather senseless classification. You were indignant when I left my wife. You are indignant now that it is possible I may return to her. I do not see that in either case you have any title to be my judge; and I regret to feel that you have forfeited the power to be my friend."

With that he left her; and she, mortified, worsted, and made impotent as an arbiter of fate, broke down into a fit of womanlike and heartbroken weeping.

She recalled the voice of John Vernon saying in the summer stillness of his garden, "Be kind to her." She knew that she had been more than not kind; that she had been cruel, that she had deserted her, injured her, and been the first to lead the world to see harm and disgrace in the solitude of that simple life at Christslea. Fool that she had been to let her prejudice and jealousy warp her judgment so utterly! Fool that she had been not to have had sense and penetration enough to foresee that the time would come when her brother would resent as a dishonour done to himself all slur and suspicion cast through her upon the innocence of his wife!

Her pride at last realised that she had no influence over those she strove to move; no wisdom in her inter-

ference, no place in the hearts of those she loved; she saw at last her own soul as it truly was, with curiosity in the guise of friendship, harshness in the mask of justice, meddlesome and vexatious authority in the form of affection, unconscious jealousy and malignity in the golden robes of virtue.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A WHOLE day and yet another sleepless night had passed with Gladys in that wretchedness of uncertainty in which the soul is like a house divided against itself. All that was noblest in her urged her to do what Aubrey had begged of her; all that was human, weak, passionate and selfish refused to do it.

She understood why marriage, which is so burdensome and so unrecompensed to the man, is to the woman so great an emancipation and enrichment. Yet were she only free now—only a child as she had been when Guilderoy had found her on the moors! And she remembered bitterly that, even if she were so, the world would only see in her feeling for Aubrey ambition and acquisitiveness, as it had seen it in her marriage; and the voice of her father seemed to rebuke her, saying, as he had often said, in the words of Socrates to Crito, "Is it worth while to think so much of the opinion of others?"

No, it was not worth while; all the natural nobility of her nature recognised the nobility of Aubrey's words and acts; but, womanlike, their austerity, commanding

her admiration, left her heart cold; womanlike, she would have fain had him think less of his honour, more of her. An infinite regret, which she knew would abide with her so long as ever she should have life, weighed on her for the pain which she had brought on him through her unthinking acceptance of his devotion and her too selfish appeals to him. And yet it seemed to her that after all he loved her but little! Women can never accept or understand the feeling which places honour before themselves. It only hurts them.

With the contradiction of human wishes, the simple secluded life of Christslea, which had seemed hardly better than a living death, grew dear to her. The even and monotonous time, the empty house, the homely ways, seemed safe and peaceful. Beside the troubled course of passions, of pleasures, and of pains which make up the life of the world, her residence in this little seaside hamlet appeared serene and secure as the haven of a religious house appeared to those who, after the deceptions of love and the temptations of power, withdrew themselves to Port Royal or La Trappe. Its dreariness, its vacancy, the despair before it which had often seized her in its long moonless winter nights, when the silence of snow was all around, and in its grey melancholy summer evenings, when the hoot of the owl alone answered the lapping of the waves, all these passed away from her mind; she only remembered that here she had known that freedom from fresh and poignant pangs which seemed to her the nearest approach to happiness that fate would ever give to her.

She shrank from all which return to her life with her husband must mean for her. She was wholly honest;

and, accepting what he offered, she knew that she must fulfil all her obligations to him. Some women might have made a feint of forgiveness only to acquire the means to wound, to irritate, to chastise, to mortify him; but any such treachery as that was impossible to the daughter of John Vernon. Returning to her life at Ladysrood must, she knew, mean for her the re-assumption of all those ties from which she had for nearly two years looked upon herself as freed.

She could do nothing meanly. As her severance from him had been complete and uncompromising, so she knew that her reunion with him must be entire, and her acceptance of him faithful in the spirit as well as in the letter. Only a year ago it would have made her so happy to have given that which he sought! Though she had scorned the suggestion of reconciliation with her lips, she had often yearned for it in her heart; but now—now it was too late to give her any possible joy; she shrank from its necessity with both her body and her mind.

“What am I to do? What shall I choose?” she asked herself, with passionate anxiety to make the choice which should be right in her father’s sight and Aubrey’s. The one was dead, the other absent; but both seemed very close to her through all these hours, both seemed at once her counsellors and her judges.

At times she remembered Guilderoy as he had been in the first weeks of their life together, and then a shudder passed over her, thinking that all those ecstasies, those adorations, those entreaties lavished on her then, had all been given since to others; and at such moments the quiet chamber, the unbroken solitude

of this little cottage seemed to her the "haven under the hill," like that which sheltered the storm-tossed fisher-boats of Christslea where the cliffs curved inward facing the setting sun.

She passed the chief portion of the day pacing to and fro under the willows and yews where the marble column said of him whose mortal frame lay underneath it, shut within the earth, that death comes kindly to those by whom death has never been desired. The swallows flew in and out of the quiet place, building their nests in the eaves and gables of the church. The soft pale sunbeams fell through the dark shadows of the yew-trees and the grey plumes of the willows. Now and then some cry of a fisherman to another from the shore came faintly on the air; and the broad white wing of a curlew brushed the topmost boughs of the churchyard trees. When she left her father's grave it was again evening; calm and colourless and sad as English evenings are, it seemed like the reflection of her own soul. Her choice was made.

It was late in the afternoon of the third day when she entered the woods of Ladysrood.

They were in all the delicate and lovely greenery of their first foliage. The bracken and ferns were waving breast high, and the birds were singing in the brushwood of the undergrowth and in the branches of elm, oak, and beech. The ground was blue in many a nook with pimpernel and the wild hyacinth. Across the grassy drives ever and again a deer bounded or a hare scudded. He had never cared for sport as other men care, and his woods and forests were for the most part

the peaceful haunts of unmolested woodland creatures. She thought dreamily of the old story of Griseldis; had Griseldis, when her triumph came, lost the love out of her heart which had borne her through all her trials? Had she, when bidden to return to her kingdom, lost all wish for it, and only felt the heaviness of the burden she was summoned to take up, the weight and imprisonment of the reunion?

Likely enough; likely enough that Griseldis had been a happier woman in her misery, when hope and love had still been with her, than in her return to her palace and her pomp.

She passed through all the sunshine and stillness and fragrance of the dewy glades, and entered those great gardens of the south-west, in which the rose-walk was where her father had bade her have patience, and Aubrey had said the same words to her: words which had seemed to her then so cold, so commonplace, so barren.

She saw the stately evergreen avenue, the long aisles of the berceaux, the wide stone flights of the terrace steps, and the western front of the house, its buttresses and casements hung and garlanded with pink and golden banksia in full flower; and for a little while she could not see them for the tears which blinded her eyes. There her father had stood with her in the summer night and had said to her:

"It lies with you to retain three angels which stand about the throne of life—honour, unselfishness, and sympathy."

The men at work as she passed and the two servants who were idling on the terraces recognised her, and

saluted her humbly, and were startled and afraid to see her there.

She bade them send the housekeeper to her.

"My lord returns to-morrow. Prepare every thing," she said briefly. The old woman kissed her hand and murmured trembling, "The Lord be thanked!"

Gladys looked at her with a strange look. "Will it be well or ill?" she thought, and said no more; but entered the house where she was mistress, and uncovered her head, and sat down by one of the windows, and gazed out at the gardens smiling in the western sun. An infinite peace seemed to lie like a benediction on the great house in its silence and fragrance and majesty. But there was no peace in her heart.

"My father will be content, if he knows," she thought.

She could not think of his soul as dead, as ignorant or as careless of her fate.

She rose after awhile and went up the staircase to her own apartments, Kenneth and the other dogs following her with soft noiseless tread; they knew the place again, but the change to it troubled them. She let the women take off her the rough serge gown she wore, symbol of the freedom and the solitude she relinquished, and clothe her in one of the many gowns which she had left there; a gown of pale grey velvet, embroidered with silver threads, with old laces at the throat and arms. As she looked at the worn folds of the serge skirt, with all its stains of sea-sand and of wet grasses, she sighed as Griseldis may have done, despite all, when she put off her peasant's kirtle for the regal robe once more.

With the old worn gown she put away from her for

ever liberty of the affections, liberty of the actions, liberty even of the thoughts; for she was very loyal, and giving herself once more she gave her undivided allegiance.

She clasped a necklace about her throat, a necklace of old Venetian gold-work which he had given her in the early days of their stay in Venice, and turned from the mirror feeling as though a score of years had gone since she had last stood before it there. Then she descended the stairs, where the afternoon sun still streamed through the painted windows across the broad steps and the oaken balustrade.

She went slowly, feeling as though she dragged a dead body with her; the amber glow of the late afternoon shining on the silvery softness of the velvet and the gold chainwork of the necklace as she moved. The house was flooded with that rich light, that evening splendour, that fragrance from blossoming gardens and from dewy woodlands; it seemed to make a festival with its beauty and its odours and its colour for her as she moved.

But her face was white, her step was reluctant, her heart sick. For she knew that he was on his way thither, and would soon rejoin her. Even her return to Ladysrood would be attributed by the world to coarse and selfish reasons; and the remembrance of that imputation of low motives which the world is sure to cast on high emotions, must ever be to the nature which is above the herd a loathsome and galling remembrance.

She looked at a portrait by Watts of Aubrey which hung in the picture-gallery. It seemed to gaze at her

with eyes which had life in them, and its lips seemed to utter an eternal farewell. They would meet as friends and relatives; they would meet perforce and continually, but the old sweet intimacy was over for ever.

It left an immense loss, an immense void, in her life which she had no belief that the future could ever fill.

She wandered through the long succession of rooms and galleries, and halls and corridors; the places were all so familiar, yet so strange to her; like the dogs, she was troubled by a divided sense of exile and of return; after the little lowly chambers and lonely shores of Christslea, Ladysrood seemed a palace for a queen. Her husband had given it all to her; he had found her poor and obscure and had enriched her with all he possessed. She had never cared for these things indeed in any vulgar or avaricious sense, but absence from them had taught her to measure their value in the eyes of others, and to understand why her father, least worldly of all men, had said to her that the greatness of Guilderoy's gifts demanded from her gratitude and fealty.

She entered the drawing-rooms of the western wing, where the last glow of the sunset was lighting up with crimson reflections all the beauty and luxury of the apartments.

She walked to and fro them in their solitude, bidding the servants leave the windows open to the evening air, which came in cool and damp and full of the fragrance of spring flowers and spring woodlands.

It was the last breath of the life which she had given up and left for ever.

Henceforward she would live in the world, for the world, of the world; Guilderoy, she knew, would never lead any other existence; the burden of its artificiality, the cruelty of its crowds, the sameness of its pleasures, seemed to weigh on her already with that monotony and that irritation which she had always found in them.

The hours passed on; the day altered into night; the servants came and lighted all the waxlights in the sconces and chandeliers of the suite of rooms. She stood by one of the still open windows looking out at the shadows of the west garden, listening to the peaceful splashing of the fountains falling in the fish-ponds under the trees.

She could hear her own heart beat in the stillness. She knew that he had returned, and must soon come to her.

Tenderness and bitterness strove together in her soul; she remembered her father's words spoken in that chamber, and she acknowledged their nobility and beauty; but she also remembered the words with which Guilderoy had there declared to her that he had never loved her and loved another woman.

"Why drag the chain between us when it is pain to both?" she thought; and her memory went to Aubrey.

The evening became night; the curfew-bell which was still rung at Ladysrood tolled from the clock-tower, the air grew colder and had the sweet breath of a million of primroses and hyacinths in it.

In the stillness and sweetness of it, Guilderoy stood before her. He looked older, paler, more weary than he had done when he had left her there eighteen months before; he had suffered both in his passions and in his pride; he had judged himself, and the world had judged him, and the woman he loved had judged him, and he and they had alike condemned him. Would this other woman whom he did not love, but in whose hands the conventional honour of his name was placed by the conventional laws of the world, condemn him also? She looked at him and made no gesture or movement which could assist him; her face was cold, and her eyes were passionless.

He crossed the room and kissed her hand with his accustomed grace and with a ceremonious and serious courtesy.

His lips were as cold as the hand which they touched.

"I thank you," he said simply. The words cost him much to utter; he felt the unresponding and fixed gaze of her eyes upon him, and the warmer impulses, the more tender repentance, with which he had entered her presence froze under them.

"You have nothing to thank me for," she said coldly. "You have asked me to return to you for the world's sake, and for the world's sake I have accepted."

"Only for that?" he said, with hesitation, perplexed and troubled.

"For that, and for my promise to my father. I said that I would never bring evil repute upon his name and yours, and I will not."

"But have you no other feeling? None for me?" the words escaped him almost unconsciously, and there was an accent of emotion, almost of entreaty in them.

"No; none now."

The answer was sad and immutable as death.

His face flushed as he heard it.

"Had you ever any?" he asked her.

"Oh yes;" she sighed as she spoke, and her eyes softened and darkened with many memories. "I loved you greatly, I have suffered greatly; but I do not love you now, nor have you power to pain me. I was a child when I loved you; I am a woman now. I will be honest with you. I do not care, I shall never care; but I will be to you what you wish; and the world—the world of which he and you think so much!—shall never know that it is so, and your honour shall be as dear to me as though you were dear."

He heard her with profound humiliation, with unspeakable pain. He had believed her cold, but he had thought that, so far as she had loved at all, her heart had been always with him. He had come to her in repentance, in wistful desire for peace, in a vague hope of he knew not what new kind of happiness; and he found the chambers of her soul closed to him, and occupied possibly, by another.

He had nerved himself to bend to what was an act of humiliation and supplication; and, unknown to himself, he had looked in return for the tenderness and sweetness of reconciliation, even of welcome.

"I know," he murmured wearily, "that my offences against you have been many and great."

"It is not that. I have learned to know that they

were natural enough. I was nothing to you; others were much. In the beginning I did not understand you; I did not know anything of men's natures or of their passions. I must have fatigued you, been insufficient for you; that I can understand. My father always told me I was to blame, that I had not indulgence."

"Your father was merciful as a god always and to all. He would tell you to be indulgent now."

"Yes; I know that he would. I know that he would condemn me more than he would you."

He gazed at her in silence; she was still so young that even suffering had had no power to mar her great personal beauty; her face was colourless and calm, her eyes full of unspeakable sadness, her attitude unconsciously one of dignity and rebuke. Vaguely he felt that it was possible he should some day love this woman hopelessly since she no more loved him.

"If you have ceased to care for me," he said almost inaudibly, "I cannot complain; I have only caused you suffering and mortification. I have told you that I will endeavour to atone in the future; but there is no reason why you should believe me."

"I believe that you mean it now."

"But you have no faith in my constancy of purpose? Why should you have any? Yet I am sincere."

Her eyes rested on him musingly, and softened as they gazed.

"I do believe you, but I cannot give you the welcome you wished," she said wearily. "I cannot, I cannot lie. If you had come back to me a year ago I should have rejoiced; I loved you then—ah! why can

I not now? Where is it all gone? Why did you leave me alone?"

"You were not alone! You had Aubrey! And what you deny to me you gave to him!"

She shrank from the name as if he had stabbed her with it.

"That is ungenerous," she murmured. "He has been loyalty itself to you; only a day ago he pleaded for you with all his might and blamed me; neither my life nor yours is worth one hour of his!"

Violent words rose to Guilderoy's lips, but he repressed them with great effort; the justice and the generosity which were in his nature beneath all the egotism of long self-indulgence conquered the passion of jealousy and of offence which stirred his life to its very centre. After all, what right had he to blame or to judge? What title had he left to speak of his right to her affections?

"The fault of all is mine," he said with great emotion. "I left you in a position of the greatest peril: if you had injured me in any way I should but have had what I merited. If you love me no more, if you love a greater and a better man, how dare I blame you? I, who so soon ceased to love you! My poor child, believe me at least in this—from my heart I beseech you to pardon me the mad caprice in which I bound your fate to mine. I thought that you would be content, like so many women, with all the material pleasures of the world or of rank and of wealth; I forgot that you were your father's daughter, and that those could have no power to console you when your heart was seared and your pride was wounded. Forgive me, dear!"

He knelt at her feet as he spoke, and he kissed the hem of her skirts. She passed her hand over his hair with the same gesture, half of tenderness, half of pity, which Beatrice Sorìa had used.

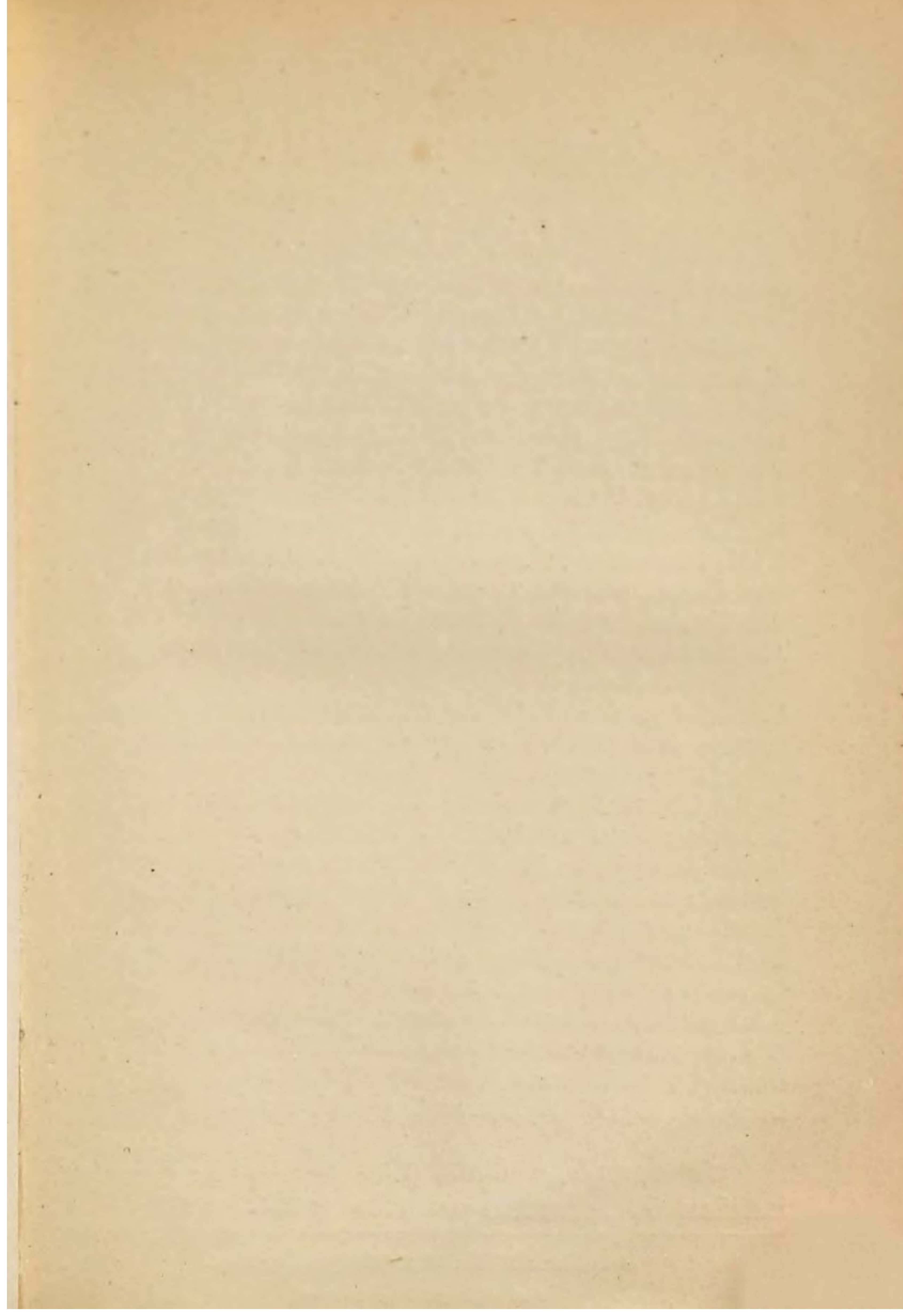
A sigh which came from her soul's depths breathed over him where he knelt.

"I forgive you, I hope, and you must forgive me," she said gently. "Do not ask more of me yet."

A few months later the country learned that Lord Aubrey had accepted a distant and arduous Viceroyalty, and, in its coarse foolishness, it envied him his greatness.

THE END.

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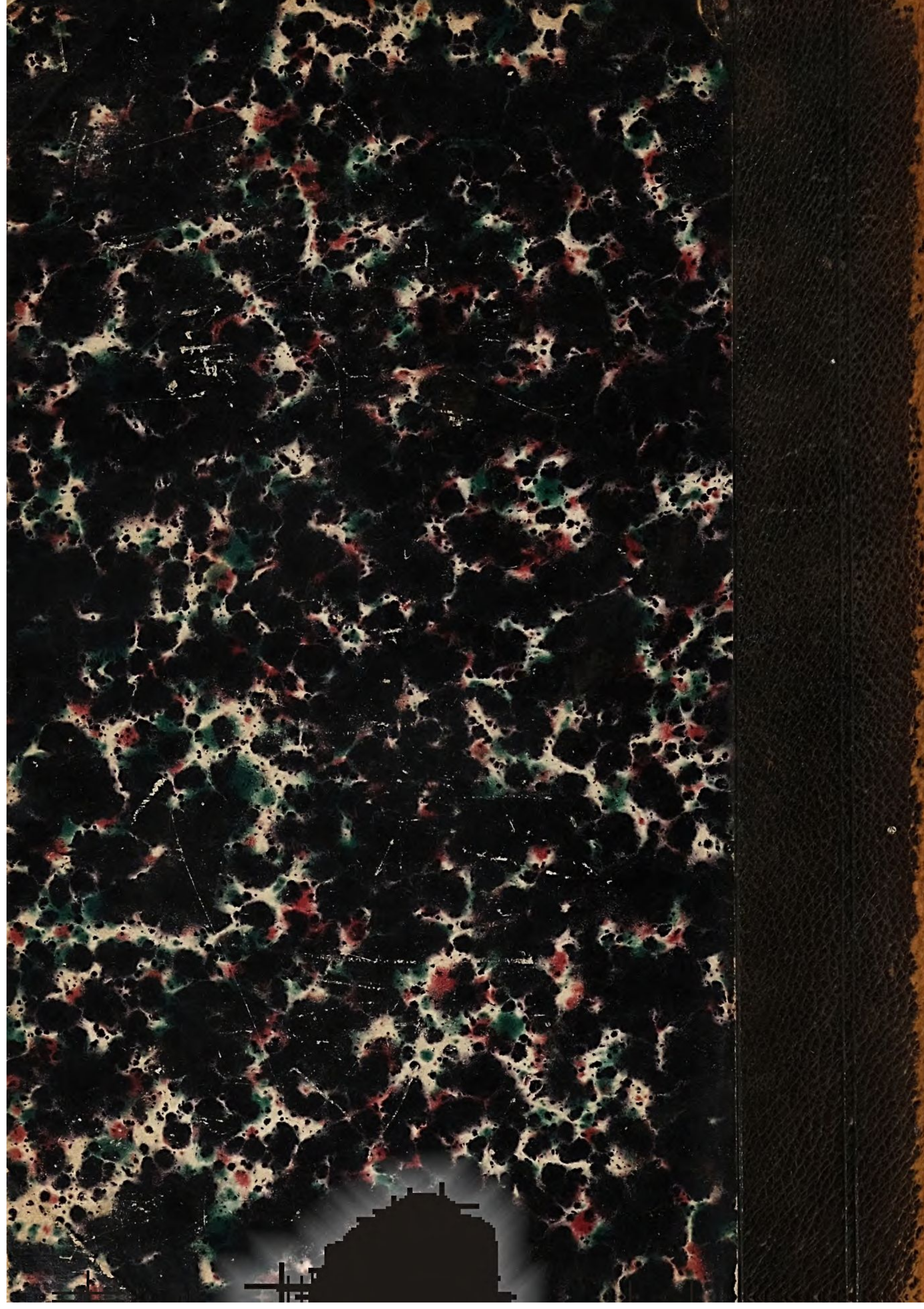
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